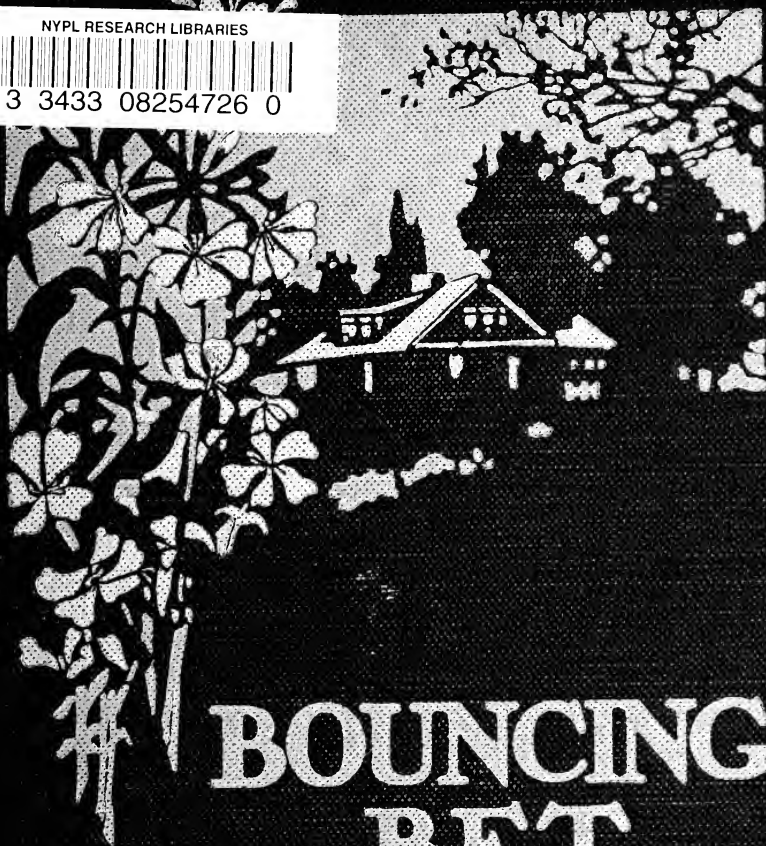


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BOUNCING BET

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BY JOSLYN GRAY

BOUNCING BET

THE JANUARY GIRL

ROSEMARY GREENAWAY

RUSTY MILLER

ELSIE MARLEY, HONEY

KATHLEEN'S PROBATION

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

BOUNCING BET

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"I shall have to ask you five dollars, which is half the customary fee"

[Page 112]

BOUNCING BET

BY
JOSLYN GRAY

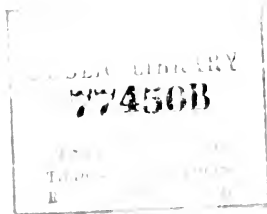
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To
NELL
SINGER OF
SWEET, OLD SONGS
THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED
BY HER SISTER

ILLUSTRATIONS

“ I shall have to ask you five dollars, which is half the customary fee”	<i>Frontispiece</i>
“ Bless my heart! Whatever have you been doing, Betty!”	38
“ Am I to conclude that it has been a wilful disre- gard of rules?”	162
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FACING
PAGE

BOUNCING BET

CHAPTER I

"P'R'APS I ought to be going," remarked Tommy suddenly, à propos of nothing.

"Going! Why, you just came!" exclaimed his host.

"But I was here yesterday, and——"

"Do you mean you want to get off—you have something on hand?" Mr. Meadowcroft inquired.

Tommy grinned. "No, sir, nothin' o' that sort. I'm too comfortable." He bounced up and down in the springy easy-chair as if to illustrate his words. "And, my goodness, I'd a heap drather be here than anywhere else. Only dad, you know—I was sort of experimenting on you—'Sorry to have you go, but here's your hat'—and all that, you know."

"Don't experiment any more, then, for it's only a waste of time," Mr. Meadowcroft rejoined kindly, his unusual voice and the courtesy of his manner making his words the more impressive to the country lad. "It's mighty good of you to drop in on me as you do, and I hardly know how I should get along without you now. I certainly hope nothing will induce you to put that to an experiment."

Humphrey Meadowcroft spoke with sincerity. Three months earlier, he had come to live with his sister in

South Paulding, shortly after the death of her husband, and Tommy Finnemore had been his first caller and was now practically his only acquaintance among the village people. The boy came often, being, in spite of moments of diffidence, pretended or otherwise, well assured of a warm welcome; but Meadowcroft realized that his first call had meant real initiative and a special effort as well as generous friendliness; for the big, handsome house which stood on the village street with gardens behind had no reputation for hospitality. Mrs. Phillips had lived here in her husband's old home for more than a dozen years, but in all that time she had had nothing to do with the people or the life of the village.

The boy, who was exceedingly lank and awkward, though in rather picturesque fashion, colored so deeply that his many and conspicuous freckles merged and were lost in the flush that extended to the roots of his ragged fringe of sandy-brown hair. His eyes fell upon his long, lean fingers, which looked grimy, indeed, though not because he had just come from school. They were badly stained with acids of various sorts and dates.

"Well, you see you're interested in my magic; you really seem to like to hear about it," he returned ingenuously. "You never change the subject, and you let me tell all about the beginning of a trick even if it doesn't have any end, you know. Hardly anybody else I know really and truly cares. Nobody does except Bouncing Bet."

"Ah, then it's a sort of utilitarian regard you have for your friends, Tommy Finnemore?"

Tommy wasn't given to blushing, but he colored again.

"O, I should like to come anyhow," he declared. "I like your talk just as much as you like my magic—I mean, of course, I like it a lot better. There's more to it. And I—goodness, but I'm mighty glad to be back here after being down in Jersey. Everybody there seemed so noisy and so—so confounded healthy."

Meadowcroft laughed as he caught the implication. His left leg and arm were paralyzed, the arm being shrunk also, and he spent the greater part of his time in a large padded wheel-chair. A pair of crutches stood in a corner. Tommy had never seen Mr. Meadowcroft resort to them, though it was said that he took daily exercise in a part of the garden which had been enclosed by high brick walls since he had come to South Paulding.

"That's rather a left-hander, but it comes from the right spot, Tommy!" Meadowcroft said. And Tommy decided to try another chair. The room was very large, with chairs and sofas and couches galore, and Mr. Meadowcroft never minded his progress from one to another. For himself, he always sat by one of the side windows, in a position where he could also see all that passed in the street below the front windows. He had a handsome, refined, rather worn face, smooth-shaven, with brilliant gray eyes and thick dark hair lightly sprinkled with gray. His dress and manner were more elegant than anything Tommy or, in fact, South Paulding had ever known before. Mr. Phillips had been a man of wealth but plain and brusque, and might have been taken at any time for one of the operatives of his factory at Paulding.

As Tommy vainly strove to amend his statement so that it would indicate that he liked Mr. Meadowcroft

even better and admired him exactly as much as if he had the full use of both hands and feet, it came to him that his other friend would have expressed the meaning without awkwardness.

"Now, Bouncing Bet"—he began, but stopped short, partly because he hardly knew what he was about to say, but rather because Mr. Meadowcroft suddenly bent his brows and fixed his eyes sharply upon him.

"What is that you call your other *fidus Achates*?" he demanded.

"Bouncing Bet," rejoined Tommy glibly, and looked for the smile that usually followed the use of that appellation. But he failed to see any evidence of humorous appreciation.

The village of South Paulding consisted practically of one long street which was really a beautiful avenue. The Phillips house stood about halfway between the limits, the greater number of dwelling-houses being above, towards Paulding, and the group of shops, the post office and grammar and primary schools below. Meadowcroft, who had never lived in the country before, enjoyed watching the straggling procession that passed the window almost continuously from morning until night. And he particularly enjoyed the school children who went back and forth with a certain regularity twice daily.

"I suppose, Tommy, you mean the big girl I see going to school with the little ones?" he asked quietly.

Tommy nodded. "They're not so little, you know, Mr. Meadowcroft, those girls she walks with. It's only that they look little 'side o' her," he explained. "Why, even I would look small myself—I mean sort of—if I

was to walk with her, even if I stood up straight, which I don't always."

He sat suddenly erect, but humped down again almost immediately.

"Poor thing! Is she a bit stupid, Tommy, or is it worse than that?" Meadowcroft asked. In his pity, he had averted his eyes when the girl passed as he would have refrained from looking at a cripple.

"Stupid!" cried Tommy. "Gee! Bouncing Bet stupid! Why, she's the best scholar in my class—the very best." He paused, then added loftily: "She takes a really intelligent interest in my magic. There's no fooling her like you can the fellows—sometimes. She ain't like some girls that say they like it to be polite and wouldn't look on while I do one trick for fear they'd be blown up or lose their eyebrows."

"But why is she so backward?" queried Meadowcroft in genuine surprise. "Surely, she ought to be going over to Paulding to the high school at her age."

"O, she ain't old. She's just big of her age, you know, Mr. Meadowcroft," rejoined the boy. "She ain't so old as me and most of the others. She's just—well, *big*. That's why they call her Bouncing Bet, you see."

"Well, I'm surprised; I confess that I am amazed!" exclaimed Meadowcroft. He hadn't looked at the girl; but a glance told one that she would have been tall for a girl of sixteen, and large for any age whatever. Her nickname seemed to suggest a sort of jovial coarseness, but he had particular sympathy for anyone who was physically conspicuous.

"And she doesn't mind being called—Bouncing Bet?" he asked, with reluctance to repeat the phrase.

"O no, sir," replied Tommy promptly, "you see her name's Betty—or really Betsey. Her father sometimes calls her Betsey. And she's used to it, for she's always been big, and everybody calls her Bouncing Bet—not exactly right out to her face, you know, and yet not behind her back."

"Perhaps she's rather proud of her size?" suggested Meadowcroft, rather hoping that such was the case.

"Proud of it! O gee! she just hates it. Why, she just—just—*abominates* and despises being so big!" cried Tommy, reaching for the piano stool in his excitement and twirling it madly. Then remembering how that action annoyed his mother, he removed the temptation by changing his seat again.

"You see she never has any fun at all, and never has had except what she gets out of my magic," he added.

"If she hates being big, Tommy, believe me she minds that nickname," Meadowcroft declared with unusual emphasis. "When I was at boarding-school I learned by chance that the other boys referred to me as Hoplite Meadowcroft. You won't get the full significance of that until you go to the high school and study Greek, but perhaps you may guess something of what I felt, for I should really hate to tell you how that nickname hurt me, or——" He paused. "I daresay hers hurts Miss Betty more," he added.

Tommy's eyes fell on his spotted hands. "Fat's—different," he said in a low voice.

"And so are girls. They take things harder than we men, Tommy," returned the other so earnestly that Tommy winked fast and got into another chair.

He was silent for a little, then began to speak of a

trick in magic he was eager to perform, which involved as a beginning getting the bottom out of a glass bottle.

"All you have to do, the book says, is to give the bottle a smart, deft rap with a hammer or any bit of steel, but I don't seem to get the combination," he observed. "The bottom busts up first thing with me every time. I've used up all the bottles I can find, and dad watches me like he was a policeman if I go near the shed, and ma just the same with the medicine cupboard and the kitchen sink, and I haven't got one yet to begin on. And how are you going to do the trick, I'd like to know, if you can't begin?"

Meadowcroft proposed to consult Herbie, the man who had lived with him for years and who now acted also as butler for his sister, with regard to a fresh supply of bottles. Tommy was properly gratified, but as the clock struck and he picked up his wad of a cap preparatory to leaving, he remarked in an offhand manner:

"I guess after all I won't call her that any more. She's mighty decent, you know,—no nonsense about her, and I'd sooner tell her things and have her watch me do magic than any fellow I know. She's really my best friend, though you never see me walking by with her as probably you see me sometimes walking with other girls in my class. One reason why is she walks so slow I can't keep up with her,—no, *down*, I mean. But that ain't the real reason. She's a head taller 'n me, and I'm not so small, either, 'bout the average for my age. And a fellow feels funny, you know, as if he was walking with his aunty. She's taller 'n any boy in school and way up above Miss Sherman, the teacher."

"You'll overtake her in time, Tommy, if you give

yourself a fair chance," remarked Meadowcroft kindly. "You must remember, however, not to shut yourself up so closely with your magic as not to get enough fresh air and exercise to add the proper number of inches to your height each year."

"Not much danger of that," grumbled the lad. "Every single time I set things afire—even the leastest mite—or forget to take off my good clothes and get holes in 'em or borrow things like felt table covers and get spots on 'em, mother tells dad on me, and he says I ain't to do any magic or even open a book on magic for a week or sometimes two. Those times I play ball. And they come often, I can tell you."

He sighed, then raised himself from his usual lounging stoop to his full height, which was surely not a fraction above the average for his years.

"I'm goin' on fourteen, but I ain't nearly got my growth yet," he declared stoutly. "And there's a lot of hope. But you see it's different with Betty. She can't grow *down*. She's more 'n big enough now for a grown woman. And she just has to act like one—to go around and visit older people and pug her hair, and wear long dresses and walk slow. Of course she has to. It's too bad, but—well, you ought to see one of my cousins in Jersey. She ain't so tall, but she's about as fat as Betty, and she wears her hair flying and runs and races and shouts and dresses in sailor-suits just like other girls. I don't think it's nice, do you, when she's so big? Sometimes she just shrieks."

"Which of the two girls enjoys life more, Tommy, your friend or your cousin?"

Tommy opened his eyes wide. "O, Madge has a

jolly time, of course, and Betty never has any fun, but—she doesn't care for it. She'd drather—I mean, she's used to it by this time. She's always been too big to play ever since she was little. And—she gets considerable quiet enjoyment out of my magic."

Meadowcroft smiled. Tommy grinned and reluctantly left the room. Sliding down the handsome solid railing of the staircase, he landed neatly on a rug and let himself out the screen door. At that moment he heard his name called, and stepping back saw Meadowcroft leaning over the balustrade with his crutches. He wished he might have seen how he got there. He had never dreamed he was so spry as all that!

"Tommy, I wish you would ask Miss Betty to come in to see me some day," Meadowcroft called down—"some day soon, please."

"Sure. That's just her line. She'll be pleased to accept," Tommy called back cheerfully, and was off again, whistling gaily if not very tunefully as he strolled up the avenue towards home.

CHAPTER II

MRS. PHILLIPS had friends in Paulding and other towns nearby, and though she was in mourning and did not go out much, entertained constantly at home. But on this particular night she and her brother were alone at dinner, and he took occasion to ask her about the young girl in whom he already felt warm interest. For though Mrs. Phillips did not associate with the village people, she knew the history of everyone and was always informed as to what was going on about her.

“O—Bouncing Bet, you mean?” she exclaimed, and laughed in her pretty, artificial way. “I wonder, Humphrey, if you remember a story we read as children—at least, I did—called ‘The Baby Giant’?”

Meadowcroft did not recall it.

“Well, Bouncing Bet always makes me think of the pictures in that story—there’s one where he’s climbing over a wall, and is stuck, I believe—she’s just so big and lumbering, with just such a big baby face and placid sort of cow-like expression. Then there’s another where the baby giant is crying—such an absurd spectacle, his mouth puckered up, fists in his eyes, and baby tears rolling down the cheeks of a six- or eight- or I-don’t-know-how-many-footer. Well, when Bouncing Bet was ever so much younger, but big as a girl of twelve really, she used to cry if the children called her names; and, Humphrey, she was the baby giant over again. I just wish you could have seen her.”

Her brother didn't echo her wish. He changed the subject rather abruptly. He didn't like the idea of a woman recalling with unmixed amusement the picture of a big little girl crying because her feelings were hurt. And he felt the more concerned for the girl.

He watched for her rather eagerly next morning. Presently he caught sight of her coming towards the house, head and shoulders above her companion. She walked slowly, of a truth, as Tommy had said, and he had opportunity for a searching scrutiny.

Tall and very large, Meadowcroft saw that the girl was square and massive, so to speak, rather than fat. She was altogether too large—he couldn't gainsay that—but she wasn't shapeless or clumsy. With different clothing her figure wouldn't, Meadowcroft decided, be bad; it would be rather like certain Greek statues, indeed, though her proportions probably exceeded the most ample of those marbles, and she was, perhaps, too big even for an Amazon.

But her style of dress was most unfortunate, as if it had been designed to call attention to her size. She wore a white blouse drawn in very tightly at the waist under a leather belt, bulging out below which a dark stuff skirt reached her ankles. Her hat was small and suited to an old lady, and her fair hair, which waved prettily about her ears, was drawn into a tight knob at her neck. And while the other school-girls wore attractive shoes with ribbon lacings, she wore ugly, pointed-toed, high-heeled boots which looked too tight and made her heavy step mincing at the same time.

Meadowcroft had not sufficient time to study her face to catch its expression—or, according to his sister, lack

of expression. But he saw that though her face was large and square, it was not what is called plump. Rather, there was a flatness, a sort of Indian cast to her features. Her profile was good, with a clear-cut chin, and her color clear and fine. Perhaps, indeed, that sweet pink in her cheeks gave her a kindlier resemblance to the pretty posy whence her nickname had come than her size to its flaunting and rather inappropriate name.

Meantime, having passed the Phillips house, Betty Pogany turned and glanced shyly back. Tommy had left the kindlings he had been chopping and run down the lane on which his house stood to tell her that the lame gentleman at Mrs. Phillips's wanted her to come to see him just as soon as she possibly could, and she felt pleased and rather excited. If only Aunt Sarah wouldn't object too seriously. She would be sure to object and strenuously. Scarcely anyone in South Paulding liked Mrs. Phillips and Aunt Sarah couldn't bear her, and if she had her way wouldn't allow Betty to enter her house. But as the lady did a great deal of trading with Betty's father, who was a hardware merchant, there was an even chance of her being allowed to accept the invitation given by Mrs. Phillips's brother.

It proved more than even. Aunt Sarah, who was an extremely exacting woman and almost always had her way, told Betty that she certainly should not go a step, talked about Mrs. Phillips for a quarter of an hour, and upbraided the girl for wishing to enter the house of one who thought herself so much better than her neighbors. But that evening when she bade her brother forbid Betty to visit the mansion, George Pogany decided that if Mr. Meadowcroft wanted to see his daughter, she should go.

She needn't, however, let it interfere with her practising. She must wait until Saturday afternoon.

"Of course, father," the girl assented seriously.

"But that doesn't mean, I hope, that you'll neglect Rosy, Betty?" he demanded. And Betty, who was highly elated, declared that she should of course go first to the Harrows'.

"Well, then, it'll surely be a case of the lame, the halt, and the blind," her father remarked facetiously.

"For my part, I don't call a man that passes his days in a wheeled chair and rides out in a brougham *lame*. I should call him a cripple, just as everybody would if he didn't live in the finest house in the country with that stuck-up Mrs. Phillips," declared Miss Pogany severely.

Betty knew that it wasn't a brougham but a victoria Mr. Meadowcroft drove in, and as Tommy had told her about the crutches, she believed the word *lame* admissible. But she said nothing. It was almost second nature to the girl to repress her thoughts and feelings. Perhaps it was long experience of repression that had molded her countenance to that impassive, Indian-like type which only Humphrey Meadowcroft had noticed.

But when she was alone in her room, as she undressed and prepared for bed, Betty Pogany sighed more than once, despite the fact that she had the coveted permission to call on the stranger whom Tommy found enchanting. It hurt her almost cruelly to have Aunt Sarah call him a cripple in that cold, scornful fashion. Furthermore, she knew that she had a number of very uncomfortable days before her. Had Betty's father confirmed her decision, Aunt Sarah would have had nothing further to

say. As it was, she would be very resentful; she would bring up the matter again and again and Betty would have no peace except while she was at school and during the evenings when her father wasn't at the shop.

CHAPTER III

TOMMY FINNEMORE was seldom enthusiastic over anything except magic. Everyone in the village liked the odd, lazy, careless lad; but though he cherished no dislike for anyone, nearly everybody bored him, his schoolmates as well as older people, and especially his parents. Wherefore when he spoke in glowing terms of the stranger in the Phillips house, it meant much to one who knew Tommy as Betty Pogany knew him, and who regarded him not only as a scientific experimenter and observer but also as something of a philosopher. And Tommy took occasion to mention Mr. Meadowcroft every time he saw Betty. He wished her to appreciate the value of her invitation and did not mind if she realized that it came through him. And if she guessed that it was in a sense a reward for her devotion to his magic, so much the better.

Accordingly, when Saturday arrived, Betty was in a state of unusual excitement, though none would have guessed it from her appearance. Perhaps it was better so. For it was childish excitement, and perhaps childish emotion in a great girl like Betty would have made her the Baby Giant Mrs. Phillips saw in her. However, it would have been far more difficult for the girl to express her emotion than to hide it.

It was also characteristic of her that though she was all eagerness to present herself at the Phillips house, she went first for her wonted dreary, weekly visit to a friend

and former schoolmate who had been left blind six months earlier after a severe attack of scarlet fever. Moreover, Betty went to the Harrows' cottage first, not because she wished to have the visit over and out of the way, but because she wanted to make sure of that whatever happened.

Betty lived in a large comfortable house on the main street not far from where it became the highway leading to Paulding. Tommy lived in a lane which branched off one-eighth of a mile nearer the post office, and Rose Harrow in a street meeting the avenue on the opposite side just above the Phillips estate. Mr. Harrow was a carpenter and had built the cottage, which had many gables and porches and a great deal of ornamentation which Aunt Sarah referred to as "gingerbread." Betty went round to a side porch which looked like a little pagoda, and knocked. Mrs. Harrow came to the door.

Mrs. Harrow had changed greatly since her daughter's tragic misfortune. Formerly a pretty, cheerful, youthful-appearing woman, she had grown thin and worn, and bluish shadows under her large dark eyes made them look as over-large as they were solemn. She always seemed on the verge of bursting into tears, and always whispered at the door as if someone within were desperately ill.

"Rosy didn't sleep very well last night, Betty; she tossed and turned," she whispered warningly; "so you'd better only stay half an hour to-day. And do be very careful about mentioning anything that might excite her. I couldn't think of letting anyone else come in, but you are so mature that I can trust you. Being such a great girl, I almost forget you aren't a woman."

Betty's face didn't express how she hated being whispered to. She promised solemnly to be careful, though she wondered what she should talk about. She was never allowed to mention school, for that would make Rose feel very badly, nor to have anything to say about the other girls or flowers or colors or games. There wasn't much left to talk about except Tommy's magic, and probably Mrs. Harrow would think that exciting. She could read aloud, but Rose's mother did that by the hour and another voice wouldn't make much difference.

She stifled a sigh as Mrs. Harrow ushered her into the familiar sitting-room, silently and solemnly as one leads a visitor into a sick-chamber. Rose sat in a big, soft chair, leaning back listlessly against the cushions. Exceedingly pretty and vivacious before her illness, the girl was thin to emaciation now, shockingly pale and forlornly apathetic. Her big, dark, mournful-looking eyes gave no indication that they were sightless except that they stared straight before her; the enlarged pupils only made them seem darker and more brilliant. Her abundant dark crinkly hair, which she had worn parted at the side with piquant effect and adorned with huge, bright-colored bows, was strained unbecomingly back from her brow, braided tightly, and tied at the end with a bit of string. She wore a shapeless dressing-gown and ugly slippers.

She had been the liveliest, the best dressed, and one of the prettiest girls in the grammar school; and the change struck Betty anew each week, though she had seen Rose every Saturday since the first of April. She could scarcely control her voice, but Mrs. Harrow's

warning presence aided her. After some rather forced talk about a nest the robins were building in the portico over her front door, which she had described at some length a week earlier, she came to a halt. In a sort of desperation, she proposed that they should sit out in the piazza for a little.

"It's very mild out, Mrs. Harrow," she added in her mature way.

"Yes, I know, but her papa's going to take her out in the buggy when he comes home, and I don't know 's she'd better be out now, Betty. What do you think, Rosy?" her mother inquired anxiously.

"I don't care," said Rose languidly.

"Then you may as well stay right here, for the windows are open," Mrs. Harrow decided with evident relief. "I'll change you into the rocking-chair so 's you'll get more breeze." And she led the girl very gently and carefully to a seat nearer the window and established her in it with an excessive amount of fussing. Then, deciding to take advantage of Betty's presence to finish some work in the kitchen, she left the room with a farewell glance of warning to the girl.

Conversation limped along a little and then halted. It occurred to Betty to propose to sing. Rose was very fond of music, and assented with rather less than her wonted indifference; and taking her place at the piano-forte, Betty sang all the cheerful songs she could think of. Just as she was obliged to resort to hymns, Mrs. Harrow returned. Though the effect of the music appeared to be soothing, she watched her daughter anxiously and presently began making signs at Betty and pointing to the clock. With some hesitation, Betty fin-

ished a stanza, then went to her friend and took her hand.

"I guess I'd better be going now, Rose dear," she said gently; and as Rose clung to her, bent and kissed her. On a sudden the blind girl burst into tears, and Mrs. Harrow hurried Betty off with scant ceremony.

"I suppose it was the music," said Betty sorrowfully to herself as she went along. "Dear me, I begin to dread next Saturday already. I don't know what I can do or say. O, and now, here's this lame gentleman. I must be careful with him, too. I mustn't speak of legs or arms or mention any sort of sports. Well! at least I can talk about sunsets and how things look, and school, if he should be interested. And—here I am already, and—I hope Mrs. Phillips isn't at home."

CHAPTER IV

THE man who opened the door was so fine and imposing that Betty would have taken him for Mr. Meadowcroft if she hadn't known of the latter's infirmity. She asked for him in her polite, old-womanly fashion and was told to go right up. But as she would have started, she saw Mrs. Phillips, dressed for the carriage, about to descend the grand stairway. Betty stifled a sigh, but she waited dutifully and greeted the lady with sweet formality.

"Who's this! Not Bouncing Bet, surely!" cried Mrs. Phillips effusively. "Dear me, how you do grow! You're as tall as I, and you'd make three of me, if not four. My goodness! how do you buy your belts—by the yard? And how old are you, pray?"

"Thirteen in July," said the girl reluctantly, as if confessing a fault. But Mrs. Phillips was not waiting for a reply.

"Did you want to see me?" she asked rather rudely, "because, as you can see, I am on my way out."

"I came to see Mr. Meadowcroft," said Betty quietly.

"O, I'm sorry, but you see it's really shockingly early," Mrs. Phillips began. But the man at the door, though he didn't interrupt, took advantage of her pause to say: "Mr. Meadowcroft said as how the young lady was to come right up, ma'am, as he's expecting her."

Mrs. Phillips shrugged her shoulders and went on without a word. She had never understood her brother's

vagaries and now he seemed "queerer" than ever to her. But she liked having him in the house, not only because he was so distinguished and elegant both in manner and appearance, but because he was a wonderful companion. And though she would have liked to manage his personal affairs as she had managed her husband's, and those of everyone else within her sphere, she realized that she couldn't keep him with her if she made any such attempt.

As Betty climbed the stair, it came to her that it would be a pleasanter world if people would choose their words in speaking to overgrown girls—to fat people, in short—just as they did for the lame and blind. It wasn't, of course, the same, but it seemed sometimes as bad as a real affliction.

The door of the room the man had indicated stood open. As she knocked on the lintel, the girl drew her breath sharply. Aunt Sarah's word "cripple" came up before her, making her forget all Tommy's enthusiastic praise, and she shrank momentarily from what was before her. But bidden to enter, she complied without an instant's delay, and went straight to the wheel-chair.

At first sight, however, Mr. Meadowcroft was so impressive and so charming that she couldn't help feeling conscience-stricken for her moment of hesitation.

"Pardon my not rising, and pray make yourself comfortable, Miss Pogany," he said in the pleasantest voice Betty had ever heard. "I am sorry I can't tell you which chair is most comfortable, for Tommy Finnemore changes from one to another so frequently that I sometimes suspect they're all like dentists' chairs. However, that blue one doesn't look so bad. You might try that."

The blue chair was truly very comfortable. Moreover, it was small. Anyone else would have pointed out the largest in the room; and Betty sank into it gratefully.

"It's right good of you to give me a part of your holiday, Miss Pogany," the gentleman remarked, glancing kindly upon her.

Already Meadowcroft saw that the girl's countenance, which upon closer view resembled yet more nearly the facial type of the American Indian, was redeemed from its potential Indian impassiveness or even stolidity by her soft-brown eyes, which were gentle and lovely of expression and full of keen intelligence. Mrs. Phillips's voice was high and thin and very penetrating, and her brother had been exceedingly annoyed to hear her greet his guest as Bouncing Bet. Now he said to himself that Black-eyed Susan would be a more fitting nickname. But he didn't dwell upon the comparison, for it came to him that that wild flower is also called ox-eyed daisy, and that reminded him of his sister's epithet "cow-like."

"I was very glad to come, sir," replied the girl politely. "I visit—the sick considerably, you know."

"But bless you, child, I'm not sick," he retorted, smiling. "I stay in this contraption much of the time, it is true, and one arm and leg aren't of much service to me; but for all that——"

Pausing, he looked at her searchingly but very kindly. And though she was sensitive and his gaze held steadily for half a minute, Betty Pogany didn't mind it. It seemed, indeed, rather like standing in a bar of sunlight on a chill day. For somehow, she didn't feel that he was thinking how big she was—what a bouncing girl for under thirteen years. He seemed to be looking at the

real Betty who wasn't fat or—anything—who was just herself, a human being like others.

And as he went on, his words seemed an echo of her sensation.

"At any rate, I didn't ask you to come in to see me as an invalid or anything of the sort, but just as a fellow human being," he said. "As a matter of fact, I had a rather definite purpose in mind, and I don't feel that I need to fuss and bother about leading up to it and all that, Miss Betty. I think I can get right at it at once. May I begin instanter by telling you something about a boy I knew? You'll get the bearing."

Betty's eyes assented warmly though her face was as expressionless as her polite affirmation. Meadowcroft wheeled his chair about and adjusted it at a better angle. And the girl, whose part in life had been largely that of a spectator, observed the beauty of the long, slender right hand with a curious cameo on the third finger.

"The boy I speak of was lame—deformed might perhaps be a better word, though it's rather ugly," he began. "His parents had money—fortunately, most people would say. In any event, he was unfortunate in that they had a lot too much. They lavished it upon all sorts of specialists in surgery in the effort to have him become like other boys. Then when they found that to be quite impossible, they used the money as a barrier between him and his fellows. They padded a prison with it in which they confined him. He was shut off from the society of other boys, from the sight and so far as possible from the knowledge of boyish sports and pursuits. They kept him in ignorance, so far as was possible, of the universe

as a boy knows it. I don't think he had a genuine boy's book until he went to boarding-school as an old man of sixteen. He had servants and tutors and drove and traveled and all that, and for years believed himself well off and a person of consequence. Then, somehow, though only when it was too late, he began to feel that something was wrong. He didn't know what it was; but he begged to be allowed to go away to school. He felt that there he might come to know what it was that was awry. At first his parents wouldn't hear of it; but finally they succumbed to his pleading, and a year before he was to be ready for college, he was sent to the best boarding-school they could select. He was permitted to have a man-servant, and his parents paid the expenses of another boy who served as a sort of fag. He was full of enthusiasm at first, but it didn't last. For he didn't fit in at all. He couldn't get near the other lads and they couldn't get near him, though they were well-disposed and did their level best to pretend to let him into things. He couldn't even make an acquaintance of the boy who helped him; and he was lonelier than ever, and actually unhappy, where he had been only vaguely ill at ease before. And then presently the explanation came to him. He picked up a book belonging to the underclass boy who waited on him, and—do you understand Latin, Miss Betty? ”

The girl started violently. She had been utterly lost in the narration, her dark eyes far away, her face dumbly appreciative.

“ No, sir; but I am to begin it in September when I go over to the high school,” she replied in her prim, demure way.

"Well anyhow, I probably shouldn't quote correctly from memory. The passage was rather impressively put and was to the effect that, as a boy, Marcus Livius Drusus had no holidays,—that is, he never had a chance to play, to get out with the boys, to have a jolly time. Well, it came to me that this Roman worthy and I were in the same class. Alike, we had been defrauded of a precious, yes, an inalienable right. You know, it's not only the fun one loses, Miss Betty; it's the association with one's kind, one's peers, the give and take, the rubbing up against the sharp corners of other fellows' personalities, the gradual learning one's proper place in the world, the sharpening of wits as well as quickening of understanding sympathy, the glimpses of homely, sturdy, hidden virtues and the reaching out for them unawares."

Humphrey Meadowcroft paused, and drew his hand across his brow. He had suddenly grown white; lines showed in his forehead that Betty, close observer as experience had made her, hadn't noticed before. It seemed to the girl that he had actually grown older since she had entered the room. As a matter of fact, the man had never before said so much as this of his thwarted youth to anyone.

He did not feel that he could go further; but he realized that he had no need so to do. For the girl understood. Her eyes were downcast; her face was almost stolidly inexpressive despite the sweetness of her mouth; nevertheless Meadowcroft was aware that she understood with the sympathetic understanding that is theirs who have themselves suffered hurt and pain.

Still, she did not make the desired application. She was only sorry for the boy.

"Well, Miss Betty?" he said after some moments. His smile, infrequent but rarely attractive, banished the lines of care. And now he looked, as usual, younger than his years, which were four times hers.

Her brown eyes, full of wonder, met his brilliant gray eyes.

"I can't help feeling, somehow, that you are in the same boat with the boy that was I, and so I want to warn you—back to land while there's yet time," he observed half lightly. "For in your case I am happy to feel that it isn't too late. It isn't nearly too late. But there's the chance that it may be so before you realize it. This is how the situation looks to me. Because you are, and perhaps always have been, large for your age, you have never gone in for the things other children take up naturally all along the path of the years. You're grown up now when you ought to be a little girl—a romping little girl!"

She looked at him so understandingly, so ruefully, so deprecatingly, and she *was* so big, so truly bouncing, that Meadowcroft couldn't himself help thinking of the baby giant. But his heart went out to her only the more warmly.

"Tell me. How long is it since you have left off playing—running and romping and all that?" he demanded. "How long have you been as grown-up as you are now?"

She smiled wanly. "O, almost always, it seems, sir," she declared. "I have worn long dresses—almost long—for years, and of course you can't do much with long skirts. And then I always looked so queer, even in games like Green Gravel and On the Green Carpet

that I—hardly ever played. And—they've called me Bouncing Bet ever since before I was six."

Betty Pogany's self-control was really exceptional for her years. But the girl had never before known real, understanding sympathy. On a sudden her eyes filled with tears which overflowed upon her fair pink cheeks. Once more, as she reached for her pocket handkerchief, Meadowcroft saw Isabel Phillips's picture of the baby giant in tears. But the girl controlled herself almost at once and tried to smile.

"I pretended—after a little—I guess when I was about eight—that I didn't care, and I kept on pretending," she owned, finding it curiously easy as she went on to speak after her years of reserve. "But I did care—I cared so that it seemed almost to kill me, and—I care now. And even now, I'd just love to play tag and Puss-in-the-Corner and the very babiestic games. And sometimes I just hate to be at the head of my class, and I'd like to waste time in school instead of always studying, and even to be real bad, just to see how it would feel. But you can't, of course, when you're bigger than everyone in school, even the teacher. I never was even spoken to in school in all my life, but sometimes I dream I am. I dream that Miss Sherman says: 'Why, Betty Pogany, a great big girl like you!' And the boys all grinning and everybody in school looking at me!"

As she glanced up, Meadowcroft smiled kindly. The girl smiled frankly, too. Apparently she didn't lack a sense of humor.

"You don't admire compulsory virtue, I take it?" he queried.

She smiled ruefully.

"That's a good name for it," she observed. "Rose Harrow spoke a piece once in the intermediate school that was just like that and like me. It began—

'I don't know how it came about
I put my sacque on wrong side out,
I didn't take it off all day,
Because 'twould drive my luck away.'

And it goes on to tell how they all made fun of her, but she sat still and learned her lessons with a will. And at the end she got the prize."

"I see. But that was only for one day, and you have gone on all your life sitting still and learning your lessons with a will, as it were," he returned. "Well, you're mighty lucky that it isn't too late to change. You can turn your jacket right side out at once and start out tomorrow morning doing exactly what other girls of twelve do."

Betty Pogany gasped. "But—O, how could I?" she cried.

"O, just resume—begin, I should say," he returned coolly.

"But even if I knew how, I couldn't, honestly, Mr. Meadowcroft," she declared mournfully. "The other girls are all—well, sort of paired off by now, and I always only watch. And I *can't* walk fast and they wouldn't want me tagging on. And I can't act bad in school time, because always being so good, Miss Sherman would think I was terrible. And I might be expelled. And even if I didn't want to go to the high school, there's father,—and O, Aunt Sarah!"

"Well, you needn't be a naughty girl. Just a natural, lively girl that has a jolly time every day is-what I want you to turn into."

Betty glanced helplessly at her tight boots. Meadowcroft looked hard at her.

"Suppose you begin by letting down your hair," he suggested. "Wear it in a tail or in curls, you know, and cut off a number of inches from your skirts. Then get some low-heeled, round-toed, comfortable shoes and—for heaven's sake take off that horribly tight belt and never put it on again. Isn't there some sort of gown you can wear that doesn't have to be spliced that way?" On a sudden he remembered Tommy's cousin in Jersey. "Couldn't you get a sailor-suit?" he suggested.

"A Peter Thompson?" cried the girl with shining eyes. "O, how I should love one! But—could I, do you think? Wouldn't it look—silly?"

"Indeed no, nothing of the sort," he asseverated. "It would look first-rate. It would not only be pretty and appropriate, but I don't see how it could help being a lot more comfortable than your present costume. With a sailor-suit and easy shoes, I'll wager that you can keep up with any of your friends."

Her eyes shone. She drew a deep breath. Then her eyes fell, and when she raised them, they were clouded.

"O, but you don't understand. I'm so—sort of stiff and settled," she almost wailed.

"But just wait until you see how much of the stiffness will disappear with the tight, elderly clothing," he bade her. "Leave off everything that isn't perfectly comfortable. Get into a sailor-suit as soon as ever you

can and then—just throw yourself into things. Go in for whatever's going on."

The girl pondered silently, but her eyes were full of wistful excitement.

"Here's something in your favor. Tommy says you have only a fortnight more of school," he reminded her. "Begin right away, anyhow, but the summer holidays will give you a capital chance to get wholly limbered up before you enter the high school. And there you can make a perfectly fresh start. Paulding's a large town. The school will therefore be large, and your class may be three-quarters strangers. It will be easy to start in with them as a girl among girls and boys. Don't think of your size. Just go in for everything as if you'd always been in the habit of doing so. You're not stiff in your mind, you know, Miss Betty. You're supple enough mentally to carry it all off if you can begin as a more flexible being physically. You can, as I said, limber up during the summer, and then—by the way, how do the South Paulding pupils go back and forth?"

Betty explained that they used the railway, leaving on the eight-thirty train in the morning and returning at three.

"And what's the distance by the highway?" he inquired.

"Two miles and a half each way."

"It would be unusual, not to say uncanny, if either way were longer? Well, that is just what they would call in London a *tidy walk*. Now if I were you, Miss Betty Pogany, I should get into practise during the holidays and then walk back and forth every trip all the autumn and winter and spring."

The girl stared at him in amazement. She had never heard of anyone walking to Paulding. "Five miles a day!" she exclaimed.

"Certainly. That's the least any healthy person ought to do," he said firmly. "Are you game?"

Whereupon Betty Pogany proved that he was right as to her mental suppleness.

"Yes, sir, I'm game," she said seriously.

"And you will—go in for it all?" he cried in genuine excitement.

"Yes, sir, all," she declared demurely.

CHAPTER V

AS Betty Pogany left the Phillips house, unconsciously she walked faster than she ever walked unless Aunt Sarah had kept her and she was in danger of being late for school. In that case, she teetered along in rather absurd fashion; but to-day excitement lent her wings that seemed to lift the weight from the high-heeled boots. She passed the lane where the Finnemores lived without halting, though she felt a bit troubled in that, with an hour to spare before tea-time, she did not stop to see how Tommy's magic might be progressing. Arriving home, she shut herself in her own chamber; and after tea, as soon as she had washed up, she fled to the same refuge. She took some stockings with her, and she mended them. But she walked so little that there were few stitches to be made with darning cotton, and she had all the time she needed for finer stitches with sewing silk.

Breakfast was an hour later on Sunday mornings, but Betty rose at the usual week-day hour. She had waked with a thrill of expectancy that reminded her of Christmas mornings when she was very small and her mother was alive. In spite of the change that the morning was to institute, she dressed more quickly than ever. And when she was ready to go down to help Aunt Sarah with the breakfast, the sense of freedom Mr. Meadowcroft had predicted was already sufficient to induce her

to do unconsciously something she hadn't done in years. She ran downstairs.

Betty had been well instructed in sewing as in all domestic and sedentary matters, and she was very clever with her needle. She had cut off her long skirt and hemmed it neatly and it was now well above the tops of her boots. She had also had to let it out several inches at the waist, for she had discarded the stays which her aunt had compelled her to adopt two years before. Neither would the leather belt meet under the new conditions, and she substituted a soft silk sash she had worn as a child, tying it in a graceful knot at the side. She couldn't determine in the small mirror above her dresser how different her figure looked already. Naturally square and solid rather than fat, the new, almost straight lines it took were a vast improvement over the forced and ugly curves which the stays had induced. But she felt the freedom, and she noticed the difference when she arranged her hair. It was fair and abundant and ready to curl. She parted it and, drawing it back less rigidly than commonly, braided it, and tied the end with a ribbon that was another treasure saved from childhood. The girl never consulted a mirror except to see if she were tidy, and she couldn't remember facing one with any sensation other than chagrin or at least indifference. Now, she hardly understood the thrill she felt as she looked wonderingly at the reflected vision with soft yellow hair waving about a pink and white face and a thick bright plait hanging over her shoulders to her waist. She had ripped the standing collar from her blouse and substituted a round turnover collar and tie that took away the primness, and when she daringly jabbed a little silver pin in the tie,

the transformation was complete. As Betty Pogany ran down the stairs she didn't look, as she had looked yesterday and the day before, an overgrown young woman. She looked what she really was—a big little girl. And if in truth she resembled a baby giant, it was an attractive, perhaps even a charming baby giant.

At the foot of the stair, however, the girl stopped short, dismayed. How should she ever face them—Aunt Sarah and her father? As she had worked busily the evening before, she had been conscious of doing something singular—something venturesome and daring; but she had been too deeply absorbed as well as too eagerly excited to be troubled by definite doubts. And she had fallen asleep the moment she had dropped into bed and awakened with a thrill of expectancy. Only now it came to her coldly that they who dance must pay the piper.

There was no question at all with regard to Aunt Sarah. She would be utterly shocked and scandalized. She would appeal to Betty's father, and alas! it was only rarely that she appealed in vain. And her father was quite equal to ordering Betty to go straight to her chamber, put up her hair, don a long skirt (she had altered two, but the oldest one she had she hadn't time to touch) and wear it to church. Betty knew well that her father was secretly mortified because of her size and that he was often the more severe with her on that account.

She stole silently into the parlor and glanced fearfully into the large mirror which she was wont to avoid sedulously. The image that faced her really startled her. She hadn't thought of anything but making her clothing more conformable to her years and so comfortable as to

allow her to gain freedom of movement. She was amazed, confounded—indeed, she felt almost guilty at the singular attractiveness of the result. Even so, Betty Pogány didn't at all see what another would have seen—she was far prettier than she realized. But what she saw was enough to cause her to turn away hurriedly.

As she paused on the threshold, trying to think of some ingratiating or deprecatory remark to make to Aunt Sarah, on a sudden something quite foreign flashed suddenly into the girl's mind and she quite forgot herself, her anxiety, her disguise (or her change from long disguising), and even that wonderful sense of freedom. Perhaps the new dressing of her hair suggested it. As she had parted it, Betty had recollected how poor Rose's hair had looked yesterday, and she had wondered whether she mightn't, next Saturday, beg Mrs. Harrow to allow her to do Rose's hair for her in the old becoming fashion. But this was something far bigger and more daring, this suggestion which flashed before her instantaneously, but with a completeness and fulness that quite took her breath away. She felt like shouting, like singing something stirring such as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." And when she entered the kitchen, hugging the vision to her bosom, she was so engrossed thereby that at first she didn't understand the horrified stare upon Aunt Sarah's face.

CHAPTER VI

“GOOD HEAVENS! Betsey Pogany!” cried Aunt Sarah, and then poured forth such a torrent of reproaches as Betty had never heard. The “good heavens!” in itself was a volume. Betty had once been sent to bed supperless for saying it, being told it was the same as swearing. And the blast of scorn and wrath that followed might have been a torrent of good heavenses. But though it was the worst outburst Betty had ever heard, she minded it the least. And this wasn’t at all because of the vision in the mirror. It was because of the other vision—the vision of Rose Harrow—that Betty endured the onslaught almost unscathed. And even when her father came down to breakfast, and Aunt Sarah turned to him to make the expected plea, Betty’s heart didn’t sink as she had believed it must.

“George, will you look at that girl! Will you take just one look at your only daughter, George Pogany!” his sister adjured him dramatically.

George Pogany, a very tall, gaunt, rather hard-featured man, obediently turned his eyes upon his daughter, though he sighed inwardly; for he hated a fuss, especially on Sunday mornings. As he gazed, an expression of wonderment appeared upon his thin, lined face, to be succeeded by a sort of perplexity through which a vague gratification struggled to emerge.

“Bless my heart! Whatever have you been doing, Betty!” he exclaimed kindly. “As I live, you’ve been

growing smaller. She doesn't look near so big and fat, does she, Sarah?"

Miss Pogany could only snort, and he went on unheeding:

"And your hair—I'd forgot you had such pretty hair—and long—my goodness! What have you gone and done all of a sudden, child?"

His sister stared at him in speechless amazement. Betty herself was almost as astonished.

"I just braided it, instead of pugging it up, and tied it with a ribbon," she said with gentle eagerness. "Do you really like it so, father?"

"I like it amazing," he said promptly. "You don't look so grown-up."

They sat down to the table. Pogany continued to gaze at his daughter. But his brow clouded.

"What I want to know is how you happened to lose flesh so? It looks a heap better, and yet—I wouldn't have you starve yourself, Betty. Have you been trying any such wicked doings?" he demanded.

Betty laughed almost wildly. Her aunt snorted again. She dropped the coffee pot as if she feared to trust herself with it and clasped her hands.

"George Pogany! Are you clean out of your head?" she demanded. "Can't you see? Where are your eyes? Fat—why, the girl looks like a barrel. A *barrel*! Look at her waist! What do you say to the size of it?"

He looked at Betty's waist. "Yes, it's a right smart way round it, Sarah," he acknowledged. "And yet, somehow, Betty don't look so big—not near. I could have sworn she'd lost pounds, and that sash shows off all the better."

He looked musingly at the wide, soft silk scarf. Then he looked at Betty's sweet, flushed face.

"When you were little, Betty, and your mother was living, she used to tie the bow behind. I remember how it hung down as far as some little scallops that edged the bottom of your little white dress," he remarked, his harsh voice pitched low. "Perhaps you couldn't reach round to tie it so?"

"O yes, I can, father; I can reach anywhere now! I'll change it so before church," the girl declared.

"Church," echoed Miss Pogany. "Church! Don't think you'll be allowed to go to church looking like that, young lady. I'd be ashamed to have you step outside the door, such a fright as you are. I shouldn't like you to go as far as the hen-coop."

Betty was as much amazed by her own boldness as she was by her father's attitude, though later she realized that the former depended upon the latter. She seemed now to be listening to some other girl speaking in cool determined accents.

"O, I'll change and wear my good skirt, but I have shortened that, too," she said. "And I'm always going to wear my hair down. It feels so much better, and father likes it."

"I'm sure I don't know what's come over you, Betty Pogany!" gasped Aunt Sarah. "It's perfectly disgraceful! Tell me, George, are you going to allow that impudent girl to go to church with her clothes almost up to her knees and without her corsets?"

Pogany's face was transfixed with horror.

"Corsets!" he echoed hoarsely. "Do you mean to tell me, Sarah, that my daughter wears corsets—



“Bless my heart! Whatever have you been doing, Betty!”

SECRET

and she only twelve years old! I never heard the like!"

"George Pogany! of course she does. She's worn them for more than two years now. She has to, of course. Anyone as fat as Betty has to wear corsets," declared Miss Pogany.

"Not if I know it," he retorted indignantly. "Betsey, as soon as you have eaten your breakfast you go straight upstairs and take off those corsets, and don't you ever let me hear of your wearing any such foolish things again until you are eighteen years old. Do you understand?"

"Yes, father," said Betty, "and like as not you won't hear of it even when I'm eighteen."

An hour after breakfast, as George Pogany, dressed in his Sunday clothes, sat stiffly by the window waiting to accompany his sister and daughter to church, Betty stole up behind him, put her arms about his neck, and shyly kissed him.

"You're so good, father," she said softly. "I am so happy because you don't mind my braiding my hair and—not being so grown-up."

She slipped out shyly. George Pogany's heart beat quickly. He couldn't remember that his only child had come to him thus and kissed him since she had been a toddling baby. Something strange seemed to have taken place. Instead of the big, overgrown daughter he had been secretly rather ashamed of, he seemed to have seen this morning the little girl she would naturally have been at her age. And pretty, too, she was, surprisingly pretty—touchingly so, in truth, to George Pogany, though he didn't realize it. He couldn't understand it at all, nor

why his throat seemed husky. But in any event, the practical hardware merchant came to a practical conclusion. He had already looked ahead to the autumn when Betty would enter the high school at Paulding with her class with two railroad fares a day to be paid; and he had decided that to the weekly total of ninety cents she should contribute the twenty-five cents she had for pin money. Now he said to himself that he would pay her fares and she should have her allowance for hair-ribbons or sweets. And perhaps, being in the high school, she ought to have it increased.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. PHILLIPS rushed into her brother's room in unwonted excitement. "Humphrey, look quick! Bouncing Bet is going by, and—*will* you see her! Did you ever see the like of that?"

"I saw her Monday morning, Isabel," Meadowcroft returned quietly. "And I have noticed her a number of times since. It is certainly a singular change. It's a genuine transformation."

"Rather a pity, it seems to me," Mrs. Phillips rejoined a bit sharply, for she felt he approved. "She was of the real peasant type, with broad shoulders and hips and compressed waist, and might better, in my opinion, have remained true to type. Now she looks like—anyone."

"Isabel, you are truly absurd, talking about peasant types in America, especially in this country village where your husband grew up and went barefoot after the cows and then milked them," her brother returned warmly. "There isn't a child in South Paulding, so far as I know, that isn't as American as you or I; and I fancy Betty Pogany's forbears are quite as respectable as ours. And if you're talking about types, that girl is nearer the Greek marble type than the peasant. I felt something monumental in her, also, when I talked to her, something essentially noble. Well—we shall see." And Humphrey Meadowcroft sighed.

Mrs. Phillips resented the sigh, or the cause of it.

She was fond of her brother and felt assured that if he would only become a genuine member of her household, instead of an alien dwelling under her roof, he would be better occupied than by a quixotic interest in stupid children which made him low-spirited. For herself, she never sighed in that manner—as if it hurt.

“Brother, let me tell you something for your own good. Stick to little Finnemore,” she said lightly. “He’s grubby, but there is something rather taking about the youngster for all that. On the other hand—believe me, it’s a big risk to allow anyone so heavy and ponderous as Bouncing Bet to settle herself on your threshold. You remember the kind-hearted traveler who invited the camel into his tent?”

Meadowcroft smiled vaguely. He scarcely heard what his sister was saying. He was marveling to see Betty Pogany making her rapid way up the street toward the corner beyond which the Harrows lived—it was Saturday, and Tommy had told him that Betty always visited her former schoolmate on the afternoon of her holiday. The girl was fairly striding. She went easily, lightly and even gracefully, too, with all her speed,—he could almost see in her a Greek Victory blown by the wind. It wasn’t that the change was marvelous in itself. It was perfectly simple and natural. The wonder was that it should have come about so quickly—instantaneously, it would seem—and that a shy child like Betty should exhibit no self-consciousness. When she had passed the house on Monday at noon (Meadowcroft had missed her in the morning, for she had gone early with her father that he might get her some sensible shoes) she had been as unconcerned and unself-conscious as if nothing had

happened—as if she had always been a picturesque, graceful, rather charming, big little girl.

There was an explanation, however, and a very good one. Had Mr. Meadowcroft known the nature of Betty Pogany's errand to-day he might have guessed the answer to the riddle immediately. It was that vision of Sunday morning that had flashed upon her and had dwelt with her all through the week. For six days, the girl had trodden on air, buoyed by the consciousness of that secret vision. In her absorption therein, she had so completely forgotten herself that she had fallen, almost unawares, into habitudes which must otherwise only have been acquired slowly and with repeated, perhaps painful effort. Upborne by the vision, stimulated by the adventure of it, Betty had dropped her husk of maturity as easily as a snake sloughs his skin, and, freed from the fetters of constraint and convention, had appeared naturally and almost unconsciously as the girl of twelve she really was. Only when she was reminded by Aunt Sarah's resentful silence at home or some remark from her schoolmates, or a chance glance in the mirror (she still avoided mirrors by second nature) did Betty remember herself. Otherwise the vision wholly monopolized her.

Tommy had scarcely seen her all the week and had begged her to come in on Saturday afternoon to see him do the wonderful trick with the bottom of a glass bottle. Mr. Meadowcroft's Herbie had collected over three dozen bottles, and as soon as his father should let him off from his Saturday morning chores Tommy was to begin on them, and he would be ready for her at any time after dinner. Betty decided to go to him first. All

eagerness as she was to get away, her rigid training and her unselfishness sustained her. She listened sympathetically to a tale of thirty-odd failures and of Tommy's trouble with his father because of the amount of broken glass in the woodshed, and watched with her wonted hopeful interest a substitute trick he tried to perform. It wasn't successful, and she agreed with Tommy that picking up broken glass had spoiled the sensitiveness of his hands for that day. But she gently refused to wait to see him try again, rushed down to the shop on an errand for Aunt Sarah, and, when Mr. Meadowcroft saw her and marveled, was hastening to her real journey's end.

When Mrs. Harrow opened the door, Betty's eyes shone so deeply and her cheeks glowed so rosily, that in other circumstances that lady must have wondered. But she hadn't seen the girl since the preceding Saturday, and there was something far more striking and startling to discover about her than shining eyes and glowing cheeks. She stared at her in utter amazement, her face, which, since Rose's illness, had taken on a seemingly permanent expression of half-fretful, half-despairing anxiety, becoming void for the nonce of all save sheer wonderment.

"Why, Betty Pogany!" she cried. Then she recollected herself and dropped her voice to the hushed, sepulchral half-whisper which had become habitual with her and which seemed to Betty to-day worse than ever before. "What does this mean—your hair down and a short skirt and—you have left off—— I suppose it is just a Saturday afternoon frolic, but I wonder your aunt let you come out in the street so."

"O no, it isn't just for to-day, it's for always—or until I am really grown-up," Betty returned in her clear, sweet voice, which she did not lower though Mrs. Harrow's finger flew quickly to her lips in warning. "I'm going to wear my hair in a tail and my skirts like this till I'm seventeen or eighteen; and father's forbidden me to wear corsets."

Mrs. Harrow looked at the girl as if she believed she was out of her head and was wondering whether she was dangerous.

"How is Rose?" Betty asked eagerly.

"About the same," whispered Mrs. Harrow lugubriously. "Don't say anything to her, Betty about—your clothes, you know, and your hair. You won't, will you?"

"But, Mrs. Harrow, why not? What's the harm?" the girl asked eagerly. And Mrs. Harrow stared harder than before.

"Why, Betty Pogany! to think of your asking that! I have always thought I could trust you just like an older person," Mrs. Harrow whispered reproachfully, her eyes round and shocked. "You ought to know yourself that it would make Rose feel terribly, for you know how I try to keep her from thinking of old times."

"But, Mrs. Harrow, what *can* she think of?" the girl asked warmly. "She's got to think of something, Rose has, and there isn't anything but old times, is there, unless you let me talk about things going on now?"

"She can think about the book I'm reading to her," declared Rose's mother severely. "It is sweet and soothing and—I think, Betty, you had just better go right on with it to-day instead of talking or singing. If you

talk—your voice is different and I am sure it would excite her. And if you come to anything in the book that you think would excite her, just leave it out. But be very careful about it. Don't stop or let her dream that you're skipping anything. Rosy's so nervous that——”

“Mama!” called Rose fretfully from the room beyond the passage, “why doesn't Betty come in?”

“Poor darling, she's very suspicious lately,” whispered Mrs. Harrow, and hurried Betty in.

“Betty had to stop in the entry a minute to—to fix something,” she explained nervously. “She came as soon as—it was all right, Rosy darling. I suppose it did seem long.”

“But, mama, what were you saying all that time?” demanded the hollow-eyed girl querulously. “I heard you whispering and whispering and whispering.”

Mrs. Harrow glanced at Betty in dismay, but she answered hurriedly.

“O, I wasn't whispering, Rosy, but I suppose my voice was husky because of reading so long, and we were only talking about how people don't half sew braid on skirts nowadays,” she said glibly, the while Betty's eyes grew round with an amazement that was almost horror. “You know, darling, Betty being such a great girl and wearing long dresses has to have braid on the bottom of her skirt just as ladies do.”

Deeply shocked by such duplicity in one whom she had always respected, Betty dropped weakly into a chair. But her spirit did not fail her. And when Mrs. Harrow began to point at the open book, puckering her lips and grimacing grotesquely, though the girl knew what she

meant, she wouldn't respond. Mrs. Harrow, however, was equal to the occasion.

"What's that, Betty?" she asked, affably rhetorical. "O—that book? I'm reading it to Rosy and it is very sweet, indeed. I want just to run out and do my marketing before Mr. Harrow gets back, and if you want to go on with the book while I'm gone, I sha'n't feel rushed. Page 63 is where I stopped. See, right there. You might just read that sentence over to get a good start."

Betty took the book and read the sentence in docile fashion. She went on quietly and Mrs. Harrow, after standing on the threshold a few moments, left the room. Betty read steadily until she heard the gate slam to. Then she stopped in the midst of a sentence.

CHAPTER VIII

“**R**OSE, I’ve got something to tell you!” cried Betty eagerly. “It’s something splendid, but I can’t do it here. Come out and take a walk, won’t you? You see I want to be sure to get it all over without your mother’s hearing. You can tell her afterwards.”

Rose’s eyes filled with tears.

“O, Betty, I couldn’t,” she protested, her voice dropping its listlessness. “I haven’t been out since—you know, except when papa takes me in the buggy.”

“Well, what of that?” demanded Betty. “All the more fun, if it’s the first time. It’s lovely to-day. Everything looks and smells so sweet. We won’t go far.”

“O, but I couldn’t! People would—*see me!*” cried Rose shrinkingly.

“Well, let ’em, Rose. And anyhow, they’d just love to, everybody would. And why shouldn’t they? You look just the same as you always did except that you’re awfully pale and your hair isn’t done so prettily. People that didn’t know would never dream you couldn’t see. Listen! wouldn’t it be fun to go along as if nothing had happened and when I see anyone coming I’ll tell you and you can say ‘hullo’ like you always did?”

Rose Harrow sat erect in her chair, clasping her hands almost wildly.

“Betty, is that true? Do you mean that, or are you just saying it like mama says things, because you pity

me?" she demanded. "Do I look the same? You don't mean—you *can't* mean that my eyes look—all right?"

"I do mean it," asseverated Betty.

"Honest and true?" demanded Rose. Betty's reputation for truthfulness was established, but Mrs. Harrow's conduct indicated that another sort of ethics prevailed with the blind. Moreover this statement was too wonderful to be conceivable.

"Cross my heart and hope to die, they look exactly the same," Betty declared solemnly. "Your eyes haven't changed the least mite except that they look a little darker and sort of sober instead of sparkling. Tommy could hardly believe it, nor father, but it's true. If you wouldn't hang your head and would turn towards people when they spoke, why, nobody——"

Betty stopped, appalled. For Rose was sobbing wildly.

"Rose! darling Rose!" she cried, running to her and throwing her arms about her.

"O, Betty, why didn't you say so before? Why didn't somebody tell me?" the girl wailed. "I have suffered so. And everyone sounded as if—— O, I thought I looked frightful, so that——"

On a sudden she raised her head. As she smiled through her tears, Rose was almost her old self. She dried her eyes quickly.

"Sure, Betty, I'd love to go to walk!" she declared happily. "We'll go as soon as mama gets home to put on my shoes and get my hat, and——"

"We can do that ourselves," suggested Betty. "I know where your shoes are." And she fetched them from a clothespress.

Rose shook off one slipper and held out her foot.

"Why don't you try putting them on?" suggested Betty diplomatically.

"But I shouldn't know which was which," Rose faltered rather pitifully.

"Try one, and if that isn't right, then the other," Betty advised. "There's only two chances, you know. It isn't like you were a centipede." And she put one shoe into Rose's hand and the other on the floor. Rose had them on her feet and tied in a twinkling, but the curious sense of satisfaction following the simple act lingered.

"Now we'll go up to your room and do your hair like you used to wear it," Betty went on in a manner she strove hard to make matter-of-fact, though secretly she was wildly excited. "I'll part it for you if you don't get it straight. Do you know who you look just like now with it so slick and prim? Little Huldy Christiansen!"

Rose laughed out—for the first time since Christmas. She rose. Her face eager, her eyes sparkling, she stood perfectly still holding out her hand, ready to be guided. But Betty had not been thinking and planning for naught all through that week.

"Rose, don't you remember how when I used to stay all night with you, you would come downstairs in the pitch-dark to get apples and things to eat in bed?" she asked. "I couldn't come, too, you know, because I was so big the stairs would have creaked."

"Sure I remember," said Rose, and laughed again. But she did not make the application expected.

"You didn't need anyone to lead you then," Betty re-

mind her. "Why can't you find your way to your own room just as well now as you could then?"

Rose's face lighted up.

"Of course!" she cried. "I never thought. Perhaps I can." And suddenly she started boldly.

She encountered the center table with some force, but laughed gaily. That gave her the direction and she went thence unerringly into the passage, caught the balustrade, and ran excitedly up the stair and into her own chamber. When Betty reached the room, Rose sat on the bed, half-laughing, half-crying.

"Come," said Betty, who paused at the dresser. "We must get your hair done and your dress changed." Rose slipped out of her dressing-gown, followed Betty's voice to the dresser and released her long, abundant dark brown hair from the tight plait. When she had brushed it out, she tried parting it, and when the parting was pronounced straight, both girls laughed as if it were a game. And when it was braided and tied, there was so much of the old color in Rose's cheeks that Betty cried out.

"O, Rose, you look so pretty and so natural!" she exclaimed, kissing her. "You look just like old times."

Rose drew a long, sobbing breath.

"What dress do you want?" Betty asked quickly.

"My blue skirt and middy!" cried Rose eagerly.

"Help yourself!" said Betty in a funny voice, and they laughed again.

Rose found the skirt in the clothespress and the blouse in a drawer of the chest. When she was dressed, Betty declared the transformation was complete. Rose was feeling in the top drawer of the dresser for a scarlet tie

when the girls were startled by an agonized wail from below.

"Rose! Rose! Rosy darling!" cried Mrs. Harrow beseechingly; and before the startled girls could find voice, "Betty Pogany! what has happened? Where is Rose?"

"Hoo-hoo! here we are, mama, up here in my chamber!" Rose sang out in a gay voice Mrs. Harrow had not heard in six months and never expected to hear again. Flying upstairs, she stood on the threshold of the chamber white and breathless.

She stared at that familiar, beloved figure standing adjusting a tie before the mirror as if she believed she was in a dream—her expression made it a nightmare. Then she turned questioningly to Betty. She couldn't speak; but she looked as one might who has entrusted an infant to another and found him standing it on its feet and urging it to walk.

"Betty's going to take me out for a little walk, mama," said Rose demurely. She looked so sparkling and lively, so like the girl she had been before that terrible illness, that her mother felt as if her heart were breaking.

"My darling, I couldn't let you do that," she gasped. "And O, Rosy, do sit down."

Going to the girl, she forced her gently into a padded rocker she had placed in her chamber since her illness.

"You're not strong enough to walk," she added, "and, O, something might happen! I should worry every second. Your papa'll be here very soon now, and if you'll both promise to be very quiet, I'll get him to take Betty along, too."

"But Betty doesn't want to ride, and neither do I," Rose rejoined. "I'm dead sick of it, so there!"

"It might help Rose to get stronger to walk a little, Mrs. Harrow," Betty urged very gently. "We wouldn't go but just a teeny way, and I'd be awfully careful. And what can happen now any more than when Rose used to be out with the girls?"

Mrs. Harrow almost glared at the girl. The poor woman was nearly distraught.

"It's very different," she retorted. "I should be frightened to death and Rose sha'n't go one step. And I don't know what you mean, anyhow, Betty Pogany, coming here looking like an overgrown Tomboy and putting crazy notions into Rosy's head. I wish I hadn't let you in. Something seemed to warn me not to. But I thought a great girl like you, a woman grown, might be trusted."

Rose was leaning forward on the padded arm of the chair.

"What does she mean by your looking like a Tomboy, Betty?" she asked wonderingly.

Betty glanced deprecatingly at Mrs. Harrow.

"I have got on a short skirt and low-heeled shoes and don't wear corsets any more," she said in a low voice. "And I've got my hair down my back, too."

Rose reached out and skilfully caught the thick bright braid and gave it a playful yank.

"O, Betty, I wish I——" she began, but stopped herself. She looked towards her mother.

"There's no use in picking on Betty, mama," she remarked. "I am going to walk. I haven't been out of the house for six months except to be lifted into that old buggy like a sack of meal and to ride behind that pokey old horse. And I'm sick to death of sitting in the

house from morning till night hearing reading, reading, reading, with all the parts I'd care anything about skipped. And I'm tired of being pitied. And you never told me that—that I don't look hideous nor even blind, and——”

As the tears filled her eyes, she pressed her pocket-handkerchief to them and would have risen. But her mother, who had ousted Betty from her place beside the chair, put out a gentle hand to restrain her. Mrs. Harrow began to feel that her daughter was in a fever and delirious.

Rose fixed her great, dark, hollow eyes upon her.

“If you don't let me go out with Betty, this is what I shall do, Mama Harrow,” she threatened vehemently. “I shall lie on that bed and cry until I am sick, and then I'll cry till I die. I might as well die, anyhow, if I've got to go back to—everything!”

“O, Rosy darling, you'll break my heart!” protested her mother.

“I mean it,” said Rose firmly. Then suddenly she reached out and seized her mother's hand.

“O, mama, I want to go just awfully! I *want* to, just as I used to want things, and—it will make me happy as I used to be happy,” she pleaded.

Mrs. Harrow yielded perforce. She fetched Rose's hat and spring jacket, though with manifest reluctance, looking daggers at the naughty girl who had incited the mischief. Rose suffered her to put on the wraps as if she had been an invalid, but she broke free and, finding the stair, slid down the bannister.

At the door, she turned, hugged and kissed her mother and bade her cheer up. Mrs. Harrow patted her

shoulder but frowned darkly at Betty. As the girls went down the flagged walk, however, arm-in-arm, the mother relented. For it seemed like a happy dream of Rose. Her hand loosely resting on Betty's arm, the girl walked lightly and fearlessly beside her, only her pallor and a slight weakness differentiating her from the girl who had gone through that gate in just that manner so many times in that past which Mrs. Harrow had believed forever past. Rose was chattering, too, quite in the old way, and just as they turned the corner into the avenue, her laugh rang out,—the sweetest music in the world to the woman on the porch. As she entered the house, tears streamed down her face, but her heart was lighter than it had been in many a day. And presently she was trying to decide what Betty would like best for tea. For she meant to keep the girl and have a real feast to celebrate the wonderful occasion.

CHAPTER IX

“**T**OMMY, I have missed you shockingly. You haven’t been in for days and days. I suppose science has been benefiting at my expense. Magic must have been working like yeast?” Mr. Meadowcroft observed pensively.

“Magic nothing!” Tommy grumbled, pausing in his wandering about the big handsome parlor and dropping like a jack-in-the-box into a deep, cushioned chair. “I was kep’ in after school for an hour every night for a week, and instead of making up to me for missing all that magic and all my visits here with you, what do you think dad did? He kep’ me at home all day Saturday and made me clean the woodshed, and no magic all this week. It’s what you call adding insult to injury. And all for—I was going to say nothing, but I guess you were right, Mr. Meadowcroft. It was really for science, as you call magic.”

“How was that?”

“The girl that sits in front of me—or did, because I don’t sit there since—has got long yellow hair with sort of a tassel on the end. She’s always a-switching it over my desk, and I’m always wishing the tassel would fall into my ink-well and wanting to give it a little poke but never doing it. But in one of my tricks I pour a few drops of liquid into a red solution and it takes the color all out and I says to myself I’ll try it with ink. I took a bottle of the solution to school and dipped

Helen's hair—the tip end, you know—into the ink-well and was just going to neutralize it by putting it into the bottle when the teacher caught me. I tried to explain and to get her to let me try the antidote, but—nothing doing!”

“Did Helen's hair come out all right?” Meadowcroft inquired.

“It washed out, I guess,” Tommy returned indifferently. “Anyhow, 'twas only an inch or two and Betty says her Aunt Sarah trims her hair every new moon and the queer part of it was there *was* a new moon just that time. And what do you think? Betty offered to let me try it on her hair!”

Meadowcroft started.

“I didn't do it,” Tommy reassured him. “I think it would have been safe enough, but if anything had happened and Betty had had to trim the end of her braid, her Aunt Sarah would have been sure to have missed it and made a fuss. And she hasn't even got back to ordinary yet with Betty since she made all the changes, you know. And even her ordinary ain't none too good.”

He rose, picked up his cap, and seating himself in another chair twirled it about his knee.

“She ain't a mite more aggravating than dad, Aunt Sarah ain't. There's no one that can beat him at spoiling a home run every time. But she talks a lot more. She goes over and over and over the same things, and dad doesn't waste any words.”

“That was a friendly offer on Betty's part,” Meadowcroft observed rather musingly. For that seemed a part of this new independence of the girl that so puzzled him. It wasn't, of course, possible that one could be

quite made over, transformed, overnight. And yet, that seemed to have happened. He wondered if he should get the key to the puzzle when he saw Betty. But he didn't, as a matter of fact, have to wait.

"Sure, Betty's all right," Tommy declared, and added: "I suppose you have seen me walking past with her several times, haven't you?"

Meadowcroft had noticed the pair—or rather, the two; for Tommy was so thin and carried himself so badly that Betty was truly a baby giant beside him.

"It's the only way I can get hold of her to talk about magic, she's so awfully busy," Tommy explained. "But anyhow, it's funny, for she ain't really any thinner or any shorter—the heels of her new shoes don't let her down hardly enough to count—but I don't mind walking with Betty now. I like to. I've made up my mind it wasn't her size before, hardly at all; but it was her looking so grown-up with long dresses and her hair pugged like a lady's. Walking beside her was like walking with a teacher. And, gee! how a fellow feels to walk with a female teacher after he gets out of the primary!"

"Betty certainly looks different and she doesn't act like the same person," remarked Meadowcroft. "I hoped she would come in to see me soon again, but she hurries by the house always. You might tell her I want to see her to learn whether we have got to get acquainted all over again."

"You won't have to do that. She's the same old Betty," declared the boy. "And yet in a way she ain't. Anyhow, the funny part of it all is, she is so sort of—well, innocent-like. Honest and true, Mr. Meadowcroft, you'd think she had always had her hair flapping down

her back with a bow tied to it and worn brown shoes with ribbon strings and looked like other girls, she acts so natural. But I know why."

"Why Tommy, what is it? What do you mean?" demanded the other.

"Bee in her bonnet," remarked the boy, and the man marveled at his insight and wondered that he hadn't had the wit to solve the problem thus.

"What's the nature of the insect, Mr. Magician?" he inquired.

"It's all about Rose Harrow, the girl that went blind, you know," Tommy returned with an important air. "Betty simply went wild over her and the wilder she is the more she forgets about herself and being big or little or—anything."

Meadowcroft knit his brows.

"But I thought that the Harrow's girl's affliction dated back some months?" he said.

"Yes, sir; well—listen. This is how it is now." Tommy began, rounding his inky fingers and joining the tips before him. "First Betty started in doing like you advised her——"

"Yes?"

Tommy raised his eyes from the skeleton dome of his hands.

"Did you get a hunch from what I said about my cousin in Jersey, Mr. Meadowcroft?" he asked ingenuously.

"Possibly, Sir Wizard."

"Well, no matter, I haven't mentioned it," Tommy said magnanimously. "But anyway, right in the midst of her thinking how she was to begin straight off acting

as if she wasn't fat, something made her think of Rose. It came to her all in a flash, she said—just like one of my tricks, you know—why couldn't Rose do the same? Why couldn't she start right in and act as if she wasn't blind? Of course, Rose *was* blind, but then, so was Betty fat; and if she could act as if she was just like anybody, Rose could act as if she could see. Well, Betty thought and thought of it, but she had to wait till Saturday till she could see Rose. And all the time she was thinking of it and forgetting other things and stepping along spry and all that."

Mr. Meadowcroft understood the whole situation.

"And how did the other girl take it?" he inquired.

"Well, Rose took to it like quicksilver takes to gold—especially if it's your mother's ring and she don't know you borrowed it," rejoined Tommy, grinning, and trying another chair. "Rose is crazy over it, too. She was in our class in school, you know, awful bright, but gee! full of mischief and pep, and what do you suppose? Betty thinks she can go to the high school with the rest of us. Rose has set her heart on it and so has Betty hers even more. But don't say anything about it yet, because they haven't asked Rose's mother yet. She's awful careful of Rose and awful timid about her, and they hardly dare to tell her about this. And anyhow, as it is, she's sort of stunned—having Rose flying about the house and going out with Betty and eating her meals at the table and begging to wash the dishes when she used to hate it."

The clock struck six. Tommy seized his cap, and ran, calling back "So long!" from the door. Meadowcroft understood that he feared to be late for tea. During periods when his practise of magic was suspended,

Tommy always strove so to keep within bounds as to regain the privilege at the appointed time. Meadowcroft watched the boy loping up the avenue, then fell to musing.

He realized that he ought to feel gratified that Betty Pogany had so speedily handed on the lighted torch to another. The girl had good stuff in her, truly, and an active and supple mind to have applied the principle given her so promptly and daringly to one far worse handicapped than herself. Of course it was a fine thing to do, and Meadowcroft knew he ought to be pleased; but he couldn't help regretting that Betty had been moved to act so precipitately. He had wanted the girl to have a taste—a deep, long draught of happiness. He wanted her to have her fling, to be a happy, careless, frolicking school-girl. Instead of that, she had, almost in the act of striking for her freedom, fettered herself with a burden that would add to her years instead of reducing them. Instead of being a romping little girl, she would be an anxious old woman.

Humphrey Meadowcroft shook his head and sighed deeply. And yet there was a sort of rueful smile in his eyes.

CHAPTER X

TOMMY passed on Mr. Meadowcroft's word to Betty and the girl went in the next day after school. Prepared as he had been to see a transformation, Meadowcroft was nevertheless almost startled to see the change in the girl's face that had been brought about within ten days. How was it possible that that mature, "settled" expression could have been displaced by the eager, almost adventurous look that is the very quintessence of youth? Even the "bee in the bonnet" theory couldn't wholly account for the marvel. The potentiality of it must have been latent for many a day.

"I'll come in again Saturday if you want me to, Mr. Meadowcroft," the girl said sweetly, "but I can't stay to-day more than fifteen minutes. I've got to do all my practising before I go to walk with Rose. Usually I do over half in the morning."

"But you overslept this morning?" he guessed.

The girl shook her head.

"No, sir, but Aunt Sarah made me sweep my room all over—take everything out and sweep and dust and put 'em all back. I always do it Saturdays, but I was in a hurry last Saturday and didn't do it very well. And Aunt Sarah was using the dust-pan and I swept the dirt all in one corner behind the door and was going to take it up after dinner and forgot it. And Aunt Sarah found it yesterday!"

The girl smiled faintly. Meadowcroft understood the rest.

"I should have come in to see you anyhow either to-day or to-morrow, even if you hadn't sent word by Tommy, Mr. Meadowcroft," she said. "I wanted—to ask you something."

"That's mighty good of you," he declared, not dreaming the nature of her request.

Betty colored in happy confusion. That was a singular way of looking at things! She proceeded in perfect confidence.

"Tommy said he told you all about Rose," she began, "and how Rose wants to go to high school with the rest of us. But without knowing Rose, you could never, never guess, Mr. Meadowcroft, how very, very much she wants to go. She would almost rather—well, not be alive at all, if she has to stay at home—and she could do it easily—I mean she could study and catch up. But her mother won't let her. She won't listen when Rose tries to talk to her about it. She's scared to death. She thinks—O, that all sorts of awful things would happen."

Meadowcroft frowned. To himself he said that evidently Mrs. Harrow was stupid and foolish. To Betty he said that if the lady didn't wish her daughter to go to school, she should teach her herself or have her taught at home.

"O, but, Mr. Meadowcroft, Rose would hate that!" the girl protested. "She wants it all—the going and coming and being with the others, you see, just as much as the studies. She wants—why, just as you told me,

you know. She wants to be a school-girl among school-girls."

He smiled.

"Her father thinks just as her mother does," Betty went on. "Mrs. Harrow really just lives for Rose, and if only she wasn't so afraid something would happen, I think she'd give in and let her go. If someone older would talk to her, she might see that it wouldn't be really dangerous, and—O, Mr. Meadowcroft, if you would ask her, she would do it in a minute! Would it be too much trouble? Would you be willing to?"

Her cheeks were very pink, her eyes softly bright, her lips parted eagerly. Meadowcroft stared at her a moment as if he hadn't understood. Then he frowned.

"My dear child, is it possible you don't know that I never go anywhere?" he asked. "I haven't called anywhere—I haven't been into a private house for twenty years."

The girl's look of wonder, of disappointment, though there was no shadow of reproach in it, acted upon Humphrey Meadowcroft like a challenge. He felt constrained to defend himself. But how could he do that? It came to the man coldly that he couldn't explain that it was owing to his sensitiveness because of his crippled condition. He wouldn't even have had the girl know that not for the world would he have crossed the room on his crutches before her. Frowning still, he sat silent.

Betty stifled a sigh and rose. Coming to his chair, she towered above him, a baby giant, indeed, but with a light in her soft brown eyes that hurt and almost shamed him.

"I'm sorry if I was thoughtless, Mr. Meadowcroft,"

she said gently. "I—didn't understand. And it will be—all right."

"Perhaps Mrs. Harrow would come in to see me?" he proposed suddenly. "I should be very glad to talk with her and would do my best to persuade her of the feasibility of her daughter's going to the high school. Will you ask her, please, Betty, and let me know to-morrow night?"

The girl's face lighted up as she agreed eagerly. With a shy "Good-night," she vanished quickly. Meadowcroft sat frowningly silent and motionless. After some little time, he took his crutches, rose, and made his awkward way to a balcony in the rear whence a flight of broad, low steps led to a grass plot below enclosed by brick walls. Here, he walked for one hour daily. He had already spent an hour here this morning, but now he repeated it. At the end, he was so fatigued as almost to forget that sense of remissness that seemed like remorse.

CHAPTER XI

AUNT SARAH was out, but Betty attacked her practising vigorously and with conscientious regard to her weekly lesson. Nevertheless though she was in the middle of a march when her time was up, she rose from the stool at once, as she wouldn't have ventured to do had Miss Pogany been about. But though she made all haste to get down to the Harrows', the girl wasn't, as heretofore, all eagerness.

For she had to ask Mrs. Harrow if she would be willing to call to see Mr. Meadowcroft. All the while she had practised, that alarming necessity had weighed vaguely upon her mind, and now that she was free to consider it, Betty's heart grew cold. She didn't know how she should ever endure it. Mrs. Harrow would be shocked and indignant and outraged, and quite likely she would feel that it was all her fault (as, indeed, it was) and would think her impertinent. The girl was sorely tempted to refrain from delivering the message. Since it was a foregone conclusion that Mrs. Harrow wouldn't be willing to go to the Phillips house, why should Betty excite her for naught and perhaps spoil the half-hour which was all she would have with Rose? But she couldn't deceive Mr. Meadowcroft. Neither could she tell him she had been unwilling or afraid to do what he had requested. There was nothing to do but to put it through.

Mrs. Harrow refused, indeed, and in no uncertain

terms, to enter Mrs. Phillips's mansion. She had never liked Mrs. Phillips; and since Rose's illness she had come to dislike her with intensity. Mrs. Phillips was the only person in the village who hadn't called since Rose had been stricken with blindness. She hadn't even sent a servant to inquire at the door. Moreover, she was said to have made a cruel pun as to the "Harrowing affair."

But Mrs. Harrow's bitterness was all for her. She was kindness itself to Betty. She had always been fond of the girl, and the shock and strangeness of it being over, she appreciated what she had done for Rose, and was increasingly grateful. Rose hadn't, so far as her mother could judge, had a moment of unhappiness since the afternoon she had started out with Betty looking like her old self. Indeed, she had never before seemed so ecstatically happy. To-day when Betty came in the girl was in the midst of a gay waltz on the piano that she hadn't touched before for over six months, and Mrs. Harrow smiled affectionately as she squeezed Betty's hand.

The following day after school Betty stopped to report her unsuccess to Mr. Meadowcroft. She softened the refusal as well as she could, and he asked no embarrassing questions. Quite likely he understood.

"Very well, then, I shall be obliged to go to see her," he remarked surprisingly.

Betty looked at him incredulously.

"How about right now—would this be a favorable moment, Betty?" he asked.

"Why, I don't know—I mean, yes, sir, Mrs. Harrow would be home, but——"

The girl raised her soft eyes deprecatingly. But Mr. Meadowcroft apparently did not heed their appeal. He started to wheel himself over to the speaking tube. Then he reached for his crutches, pulled himself up, and hobbled across the room on them, awkwardly and with the impression of painfulness, Betty white and breathless the while, with downcast eyes. He ordered the carriage brought to the side door at once.

He bade Betty wait, saying he would take her home first. But when they got in, he gave the man the order to drive straight to the Harrow cottage. Betty longed to protest, but, child as she was, she understood that she couldn't do that.

"I'll do my very best, Betty," he assured her, "and if you want to know the result, I shall be back at the house about five—surely by quarter past. And if you want to run in, you shall hear all about it."

"O, I do!" cried the girl eagerly. "I'll be so very glad to come, and—O, Mr. Meadowcroft, you are so very good to do this. I shall always remember it—all my life."

"Nonsense! it's nothing at all," he declared. "But I'll do my level best."

The victoria drew up at the gate. Meadowcroft got out and told the man to take Miss Pogany home and return here for him. As they turned, he waved his hat and smiled.

As she saw him toiling laboriously up the flagged walk, tears came to the girl's eyes and a lump to her throat. Her first drive in a victoria made no impression upon her. She couldn't even tell Aunt Sarah whether

it was comfortable or whether there were springs in the seat. The conviction that she had been riding beside a hero so filled her with wonder and awe that there was no place for lesser sensations.

CHAPTER XII

"**T**HERE'S a man I could easily find it in my heart to envy," Humphrey Meadowcroft said to himself one evening a fortnight later as he sat alone in his room in the almost empty house. Mrs. Phillips and the servants had already gone to her place at Gloucester for the summer, but he had waited until he should have settled certain details connected with Rose Harrow's entering the high school at Paulding. He and Herbie were to leave next day.

Mrs. Harrow had been so charmed by Meadowcroft's personality that she would in any event have been as wax in his hands. But he had been more than usually deferential as he exerted himself to make her see the wisdom of not only allowing but urging her daughter to be as nearly normal as it was possible to be in all her relations, and had convinced her readily. She saw the folly of her fears, entered into the anticipations of Rose and Betty almost as eagerly as they, and helped Rose make up what she had lost since Christmas so that she could take examinations in the fall.

Meadowcroft had been driven over to Paulding to-day to arrange with Mr. Appleton, principal of the high school, for Rose to take oral examinations and to discuss her course of study with him. It was of the school-master he was thinking when he made the remark that his was an enviable lot.

On the face of it, however, nothing could have seemed

more absurd than for the rich man of leisure to envy the poor over-worked school-master. The lot of the latter would have seemed such as to elicit pity rather than covetousness. Worn, tired-looking, stooping, shabby, domestic care added to the strain of teaching had bent Mr. Appleton's thin shoulders and streaked his sandy hair prematurely with gray so that he looked ten years older than his five and forty years. His salary was meager; the high school, which received pupils from two villages outside Paulding proper, large; and he had only one assistant. His wife, who was ailing and fretful, reckoned the time spent in their lodgings in Paulding (which was his life) merely as so much dreary waiting for the vacations which they spent with her family in the town in another state where both had grown up.

None the less, as he talked eagerly and enthusiastically of his work that afternoon to a rarely sympathetic listener, he acted as if he hadn't a care in the world. A scholar, a lover of mankind and particularly of youth, his happiness in his work, which was almost his whole life, was truly sufficient to make him appear singularly fortunate to the thoughtful observer.

Meadowcroft went straight to Mr. Appleton's lodgings. The business was readily concluded. Mr. Appleton agreed to go over to South Paulding the week before the high school should open to give Rose her examinations. She could then enter with her class and pursue the regular course with the exception of algebra, which they agreed would be out of the question. Meadowcroft spoke of the two other children in whom he was especially interested, assuring the school-master that he would enjoy Betty Pogany's singularly mature intelligence and

lovely disposition and Tommy Finnemore's piquant oddity.

Mr. Appleton proposed that his guest might like to see the high school, and Meadowcroft eagerly assenting, they drove over in the carriage. It was the first time Mr. Appleton had ever ridden in a victoria, and he frankly enjoyed the novel pleasure. He felt a trifle guilty as he realized how much his wife would have liked it; but Mr. Meadowcroft hadn't proposed asking her and certainly he couldn't speak of it. And if she had gone she would have monopolized the conversation—Mrs. Appleton was always a great talker and particularly so with strangers, who were at her mercy—and it was certainly so rare a treat to have such a gentleman as Meadowcroft to himself that his regret for her didn't trouble him deeply.

At the school-house, which was a place of fascination for Humphrey Meadowcroft, who had never attended public school, the two talked long—about books, about boys and, to a lesser extent, about girls. Appleton had taught for twenty years, the last twelve here in Paulding, and some of his boys and girls were already men and women out in the world. Maude Harrow, who had been graduated ten years ago, must have been this Rose's aunt, for she had come from the South village. And there were children in the lower schools of all three villages now who would be coming to him within a few years just as their fathers and mothers had done before them. And lean, homely, spectacled, awkward, though he was, as he talked the school-master reminded his guest of some gentle mediæval saint to whom each human being represents a marvelous, immortal soul.

And now as he sat alone musing, Humphrey Meadowcroft told himself that the man's life was truly ideal. To know boys and girls so well—particularly, these genuine, unsophisticated country boys and girls—to love them so simply and frankly, to be such a power among them, to be so happy in imparting the knowledge dear to himself as to be insensible of the toil and drudgery involved, to lead them on and on and higher and higher in his endeavor to prepare them for whatever was to come after they should have passed from his mild sway—what satisfaction could compare with a life like that? It was a lot to have chosen out of ten thousand!

Had he himself been poor, perchance he might have been forced into a position which held all these potentialities. It was, perhaps, the one thing which a lame man of his tastes might have done. And how very different his life would have been from the lonely, empty, useless existence he had thus far dragged out. He might not have made of it what Appleton had made of his life, but for all that he might not have been a failure.

CHAPTER XIII

IT seemed almost like coming home to Humphrey Meadowcroft to return to South Paulding at the end of the summer. He didn't remember experiencing such a sensation of assurance and well-being and expectation since his boyhood. But it wasn't his sister's house that was home so much as the village; for the house was practically empty. Mrs. Phillips was to spend the autumn at the mountains, and besides himself there were only Herbie and a cook and the gardener about the place. Meadowcroft had not only returned early, but he had made a point of arriving three days before the opening of the high school in Paulding.

He had heard during the summer from all three of his young friends. Rose Harrow, whom he didn't particularly take to, and in whom he would have felt no genuine interest but for Betty, already wrote very creditable-appearing letters by means of a contrivance Tommy had made for her from a bread-toaster. But her letters hadn't been informing; neither had Betty's beautifully written, stilted, formal epistles. And Tommy's smudgy scrawls, though characteristic and amusing, had been chiefly concerned with magic. Wherefore he was eager to learn how matters had progressed and what the present situation might be with regard to them.

Before he had gone away, Meadowcroft had walked

to Mrs. Harrow's and back, though under cover of darkness. On the day after his return, he created, unawares, a sensation in the village by walking to the post office for the noon-day mail. He did this partly to confirm a resolve he had made, partly to advertise his arrival. And what he had expected to prove an ordeal was quite the reverse. Instead of staring or betraying secret curiosity, the few people he met greeted him with a friendliness that seemed to adopt him among their number. And it seemed very good to be adopted, to be walking the village street, a man among his fellow-men. Thereafter he walked the length of the avenue twice daily when the weather admitted.

Tommy Finnemore's father brought the news home at noon, and the moment Tommy had swallowed his dinner he hurried down to the Phillips house to greet his friend. He found him just sitting down to luncheon. The boy's unfeigned delight at seeing him warmed the man's heart. Meadowcroft made him sit down at table with him, and Tommy, quite unabashed at what was really magnificence to him, consumed three helpings of pudding while he related the full course of his experiments in magic, beginning with the day after Meadowcroft's departure, going on to a day in July when he had inadvertently destroyed a silver table fork, and continuing after a break of three weeks. Mr. Meadowcroft showed his genuine interest, and Herbie was evidently deeply impressed by what bits he caught. The latter pressed the pudding upon Tommy and brought forth some marshmallows, apparently feeling that he was serving a celebrated magician.

After luncheon they went out to the garden—not the

little walled enclosure, but into the heart of the great handsome garden whose plots and parterres had been trained and tended for a quarter of a century. Tommy frankly admired Mr. Meadowcroft's handling of his crutches and, after they were seated, asked if he might try them. For some moments he hopped about with manifest enjoyment.

"It ain't so bad," he remarked, as he dropped down upon the other end of the bench with Mr. Meadowcroft. "I suppose you played they were stilts when you were a boy?"

"No, Tommy, I didn't. I wish I had," returned Meadowcroft with a sigh. "I am sorry to say I hardly knew there were such things as stilts."

"Well, I suppose even now you could pretend they were," Tommy remarked. "I can pretend things now as well as ever. But it may be my magic, of course. There's something about magic that keeps a fellow young. Perhaps it's because you have to have so much faith." And he sighed.

Meadowcroft laughed.

"How about Betty?" he asked. "You said she was well, but you didn't seem inclined to go into particulars. I hope—all is well with her?"

"The truth is, poor Bet's in a heap of trouble," said the boy soberly. "I just thought I'd better lie low and not say much while you were eating dinner. Our physiology says never to tell bad news at the table. It dries up the juices and retards digestion. Not that anybody at home ever thinks of it. Dad had just as leave shout any old thing at me when I'm eating—he'd druther than not."

"But Betty? What has happened to her?" Meadowcroft asked anxiously.

"Well, nothing has happened, really. It's something that hasn't happened that ails her," the boy returned judiciously. "And it isn't quite so bad as you seem to think by your expression. She isn't sick or gone blind or had her teeth knocked out. It's more like—well, a broken heart, you might say."

"Tommy Finnemore! What nonsense is this you are giving me? Tell me at once what you are trying to get at—or to conceal!" demanded the other.

Tommy, despite his genuine interest and concern in the matter, was secretly gratified to have produced such an impression upon his friend. He felt that it augured well for the way he would handle his audience when he should have become a celebrated magician.

"More *like* a broken heart, I said, not really *it*," he rejoined soberly. "Anyhow, she has been training all summer on the sly, Betty has, getting used to walking fast and long ways, planning to walk to Paulding to school every day and back home at night and just lotting on it and wild to begin. But she never dassed ask her father till three days ago, and he was fierce—said he'd sooner keep her home than let her do such a crazy thing."

Meadowcroft's brow clouded. It seemed more than a pity.

Tommy leaned towards him. His voice fell very low.

"She cried all that night—or most all, and when her father saw her eyes all swelled up in the morning he was fierce'n ever. And she must 'a looked queer, because it was bad enough when I saw her after dinner. She had agreed to come over to see my new trick of mak-

ing a banana peel itself in a bottle and she came right along where another girl would have been mortified to show she'd been crying and would have broken her word. Don't tell I told you."

"No, indeed, Tommy," the other assured him. For some moments he gazed frowningly into the distance. Then he turned to the boy.

"By the way, Tommy, what sort of a man is Mr. Pogany?" he inquired. "I never spoke to him."

"Some say he's as hard as the ten-penny nails he sells, but I don't myself go that far with 'em," Tommy remarked in his judicial manner. "I like him pretty well. He's about as good as the average and a lot easier to get along with than my dad. And in many ways he's good to Betty, and when he ain't, it's more than likely because her Aunt Sarah sics him on to be fierce. Now Bet wanted one of those swell sailor-suits to wear to high school—Peter Thompkinses, they call 'em—and she coaxed him, and he up and got her one. Don't tell, but she had to get a twenty-year-old size. She looks mighty decent in it just the same."

"I don't doubt it. But, Tommy, has she tried coaxing him up, as you put it, in regard to walking to school?"

"She don't dass. She knows him pretty well, you see. And when he once gets his mad up, it's no cinch, believe me. And more often than not, he does just as Aunt Sarah says about Betty, and she's such a spiteful old cat. Just think, she hasn't forgiven Betty yet because she left off—" he moved nearer and whispered the word "corsets" in Meadowcroft's ear.

As for Humphrey Meadowcroft, he felt himself strangely disturbed. It appeared that he had set his

heart upon the project as warmly as had the girl hers, so that his sensation, also, might be expressed by Tommy's "more like a broken heart." Furthermore, he had expected much in the way of results that Betty would not have thought of. As he had told her, the walking would undoubtedly have limbered her up mentally as well as physically and made her more pliant and supple in every way. But he had secretly believed it would do more. He had felt that the regular exercise would gradually reduce her weight so that within a year she would become merely a large, well-grown girl instead of a baby giant.

Long after Tommy had gone, Meadowcroft sat pondering upon the difficulty. He felt that the plan should not be given over without a struggle, and yet he didn't know what he could do. It had been different in the case of Rose Harrow's mother. There was no question in regard to the advisability of the blind girl's going to school and getting an education; and his own handicap had given him a pretext for speaking to Mrs. Harrow about it. But this was another matter. If a father believed his daughter ought not to walk five miles a day, what right had he to go to him to ask him to reverse his decision? Mr. Pogany wouldn't presume to come here to advise him. How should he, then, take it upon himself to criticize his care of his daughter?

CHAPTER XIV

NEXT day, shortly after noon, Humphrey Meadowcroft wheeled his chair close to one of the front windows and began gazing down into the street. He knew the habitudes of the village and realized that there was little passing between twelve and quarter before one. Practically everyone in South Paulding had dinner at twelve o'clock with the exception of the postmaster and George Pogany. The hardware merchant sent his clerk home at quarter before twelve and went himself an hour later. It was Pogany for whom Meadowcroft was now watching. He didn't know exactly why he felt the desire to scrutinize his face sharply; but as he had over half an hour before he would have the opportunity, he had time to determine his own motive.

He was mildly surprised to see a young girl coming down the street facing towards the post office. He was amazed when he recognized Rose Harrow and saw that she was alone. It came to him suddenly that she had regained her sight during his absence. But Tommy hadn't mentioned it, and he saw that the girl walked stiffly and in uncertain manner, her feet so close to the wooden walk that she almost shuffled. His heart beat quickly. Either Rose was out of her head or something critical had happened. Seizing his crutches, he made after her as fast as he could.

He lost time by going down by the front stairway to which he was not accustomed. But he over-

took the girl easily. She was feeling her way unsteadily.

"Rose!" he called when he was just behind, knocking with his crutches to let her know who he was, though, as a matter of fact, his voice was unmistakable. "Rose Harrow! Wait a bit!" And, joining her: "Is anything wrong?"

Rose laughed as she stopped short, rather like an automaton.

"How do you do, Mr. Meadowcroft? I heard you were back," she said as he took her hand. "No, sir, nothing is wrong. Only I had—a plan in mind and just sneaked off. Papa doesn't come home to dinner and mama's making blackberry jam. Don't ever tell, will you?"

"But, my child, you ought not to be in the street alone," he remonstrated. "Won't you allow me to come along with you?"

"I'd love to have you, only—the game, you see, Mr. Meadowcroft, is for me to go alone," the girl explained, speaking very fast, her eyes sparkling, a pretty daring in the piquant little face that was rounder now and rosy. "I'm only going to walk straight ahead about as far as the post office. What harm could there be?"

"None, I daresay. Still, Rose, I wish you would let me go with you," he urged.

Fancy refusing Mr. Meadowcroft anything! What would Betty say? But the moments were flying and time was very precious.

"It would spoil everything if you did," she declared plaintively. "Please, Mr. Meadowcroft, am I facing right now? Stopping has sort of mixed me up."

She hadn't moved, except to turn her head, and being reassured, said a gay farewell and went on. Meadowcroft stood and watched her. As she went on, she walked more rapidly and steadily. The square which the post office faced was paved with concrete. He saw that she knew when she stepped upon it and that she reached out her hand and felt the side of the stone watering-trough. But his heart seemed to stop as she turned boldly at a right angle and started across the street. Suppose a stranger started to drive into the square at this moment!

But no one appeared, stranger or otherwise. Rose got safely across the street and disappeared, apparently entering the apothecary shop. He hoped she wasn't going to get some dangerous drug to trifle with. But they wouldn't, of course, take any chances with a child of her age. And with a sigh of relief Meadowcroft turned and retraced the way to his window in the second story.

Rose Harrow did not, however, enter the apothecary's but went into the hardware shop next door. Here, she created a greater sensation. Trade was not brisk at this hour—other merchants closed their shops from twelve to one—and George Pogany had been standing by his screen door gazing idly out into the square when he suddenly saw Rose Harrow in the midst of it making straight for the point where he stood. His heart leaped to his throat at the thought that the girl's sight had been restored. He and her father had been boys together and schoolmates, and Betty and Rose had been intimate friends, and it did not seem strange that she should run down to his shop to bear the glad news.

But she stumbled at the step and put out her hands,

to feel her way. He rushed out and helped her in with great but very gentle concern.

"Rosy Harrow!" he exclaimed. "My stars! Whatever are you up to, child, way down here and all alone?"

Rose laughed in gay triumph.

"O, I came alone on purpose to see you, Mr. Pogany!" she cried. "Don't ever tell. It's a dead secret. Nobody knows it. I have never been one step alone out of doors since last Christmas, and this is good half a mile, isn't it?"

"Yes, Rosy, good that, but——"

"It wasn't bad; but my goodness! maybe it isn't hard to keep straight. If I hadn't had sneakers on, and if it hadn't been for the cracks between the boards, I shouldn't wonder if I'd been at the foundry now or even out to Tamarack Hill."

George Pogany stared at the girl. He felt weak and shaken.

"Sit down, Rosy—I'll fetch you a chair," he said, sighing deeply. And he glanced anxiously out into the back shop wondering if he could venture to leave her alone while he fetched it. But Rose was her quick-witted self. She felt for the glass showcase, moved the length of it until she reached the end, put her hand upon the flat counter, and giving a little spring perched thereon, facing him jauntily.

"Now we must talk business quick, Mr. Pogany, before mama gets her jam cooked and in the jars and begins looking around for me. But first I don't want you to think that I came at this time because of the streets being empty. I came now because it was the

first chance I had to slip away. I felt a little bit queer—the least little mite afraid. But I love to walk when Betty's with me."

"Betty would 'a come with you in a jiffy, if she'd 'a known," Pogany said reproachfully, "or I could have stopped at the house if you wanted to see me. It ain't safe, you know, at all, your coming off so."

"But it was a secret and I had to see you alone," she insisted prettily. "Now listen. You know how I am going over to the high school and be just like the others in my class except I can't take algebra, and I am simply wild to go? But I'll tell you what I don't like. I hate like everything to go on the train every day. Mama will worry all the time for fear I'll be coming home at night with both legs chopped off, and—well, you know I *am* sort of reckless and 'twould be just like me to be jumping off before the train stopped."

"Rosy Harrow!" he cried in utter dismay.

"It's true, but listen. I got papa off by himself last night and asked him why I couldn't walk over to Paulding and back just like he and Aunt Maude used to do—Aunt Maude went to Mr. Appleton, too, the same teacher we're going to have. And papa said, yes, I could, if Betty could go with me. And I hugged him and said he'd save the car-fare, which is ninety cents, and he said I could have it just the same. And so I never said a word to Betty but came right down here to tell you. O, Mr. Pogany, can Betty walk with me?"

"Why, of course, Rosy, if you set such store by it, Betty can go with you," he assured her heartily, thrilled by the delight of doing something for one so afflicted, and the daughter of his lifelong friend.

"You are sure it won't be too much for you, Rosy?" he asked anxiously.

"Sure," she said. Her face sobered, and she added: "You know, Mr. Pogany, you don't move about so much when you can't see, and—O, it seems beautiful to walk. And with Betty—it's so easy and natural I forget—everything."

"It's all right then, so far as I'm concerned," he said warmly.

Rose clapped her hands, slipped down, and catching hold of Mr. Pogany's shoulders, drew him down and kissed him warmly. He patted her shoulder.

"And I'll give Betty the money her fares would amount to, so I calculate you two girls will make yourself sick with lollypops," he declared.

Shortly afterwards, Meadowcroft saw Rose Harrow pass the house with Pogany, her arm in his, chattering and smiling. The hardware man's tall form was bent awkwardly, and he minced along in a manner comical to witness. But his rather grim face was beaming. And Meadowcroft understood everything when that evening Tommy dropped in to tell him that Betty's father had given in.

"How did it happen, Tommy?" he asked.

"Nobody knows. That's the queer part of it. Just as he was going back to the shop after his dinner, he went out to the kitchen where Betty was washing dishes and told her if she wanted to walk to school instead of ride she could. And Betty almost fell over. And she doesn't hardly ever do much hugging of him, and her hands were in the water. But she just dried 'em a little

mite on her apron and run and put her arms round his neck and kissed him. And she was glad she did it before he told her the rest—which was that she could have her car-fares for keeps—not bad, was it?”

“No, indeed. And she hasn’t any idea what changed him?”

“Nary bit. And then she runs right over to Rose’s and asks her if she doesn’t want to walk part of the time anyhow. And Rose wants to walk all the time, and her mother’s going to talk it over with her father to-night. And her parents are easy marks, you know, compared with Betty’s and mine.”

CHAPTER XV

MEADOWCROFT was saying to himself that he wouldn't have believed Rose Harrow had it in her to do what she must have done, when Herbie came in with lights and he forgot everything else as he stared at Tommy.

The lad's hair, of various shades of brown blending into what is called "sandy," which usually hung in long, ragged, untidy but picturesque locks about his eyes, had been burned off in front straight across his brow, giving his head the appearance of that of a young calf. From the proprietary reproach of his tone, Meadowcroft might have been the boy's father.

"Tommy Finnemore, what in the name of common sense have you done to your hair?" he demanded. "And now, of all times, when you're going into a new school and ought to look your best."

Tommy grinned. "I just bunted out a little fire," he explained. "It was only alcohol, though, nothing to speak of. You see I had my mother's piano cover with silk dados all round the edge. The trick called for felt and I couldn't find another bit though I hunted all through all the drawers in the house. So mother being away for the afternoon, I took that. I was awfully careful but the first I knew it was all blue flame. Gee, but I was scared stiff, for dad would 'a given me the very dickens if I'd burned a hole in that. You see I had asked to use it before, and mother went right up in the

air. I remembered about smothering fires with rugs, but there wasn't one round; and just then my hair was hanging in my eyes like fringes and it seemed about like a rug and handier. It did the business, but dad was almost as fierce as if I had burned the piano cover, though not quite, or I wouldn't be here. And mother said 'Thomas, I wish you would forbid that boy doing any more magic for a year. The next thing you know he'll be blind too.' "

Tommy sighed. "I don't know why he didn't, I'm sure. He said he'd a good mind not to let me do any more till my hair grew out, which would 'a been the same thing. That made me feel queer and when he passed me my plate I said I guessed I didn't want any supper. I started to leave the table and he says 'Mind you, Tom, no magic for two weeks.' And then I shoved up my chair again and said I guessed if I ate slow I could eat a little."

Meadowcroft smiled. "Your parents have my sympathy, Tommy," he observed. "However, there's a good piece of felt that was left over when they re-covered the billiard tables on the top floor and an old carriage rug that I'll give you if you will solemnly promise never to try to put out a fire in that manner again or in any way that might cause personal injury to yourself."

"Bargain," said Tommy laconically.

"And do be more careful, pray. A magician should be skilful not clumsy in the use of his materials, you know. You have long, supple fingers that are capable of doing very delicate work if you train them."

Tommy looked at his stained, spotted fingers curiously.

"Time for 'em to stiffen in two weeks," he observed soberly.

"Your new school will occupy your mind meantime so it won't seem so long, Tommy," Meadowcroft remarked encouragingly.

Tommy rose. "I hate to walk," he said suddenly, à propos of nothing, so far as one could judge.

He wandered restlessly about the room. "You see it ain't as if I shouldn't have exercise. I shall play ball with the boys recesses and at lunch time—we South Paulding people have to carry our luncheons and stay all day. And when it's rainy I can go up to the bookstore and see if they've got anything new in magic."

"It will be first-rate to play ball, certainly," Meadowcroft declared. "You're pale, and you don't carry yourself well. You don't make the most of your inches."

"I play a very decent game of ball," Tommy remarked.

"I daresay."

"Of course, it's fine for Betty to walk. She's crazy about it—partly the novelty, you know," he remarked sagely.

"It is an exercise one doesn't readily tire of, I believe."

"And Rose walking with her, there's no need of anyone else," Tommy declared decidedly. "And there are houses all along the way and school is out at half-past two, so they'll be home at four dead easy."

"Yes, indeed, it is perfectly safe," Meadowcroft agreed.

Tommy walked over to the mantel and examined the clock.

"Of course, once in a while, after they get started, I might walk home with 'em," he announced as he

turned. "But if I should start out doing it the first day or even the first week, I should feel like thirty cents, Betty being so much taller, you see. I could tell you right now what the boys would call me if I did—I know a thing or two about boys. They'd call me Baby Brother. Later on they'd know me better. They'd learn that I can pitch a pretty decent ball and that I could lick any one of 'em—I guess I could—and after that a fellow can do as he likes."

He drew a deep sigh and passed his hand over his ragged fringe of hair.

"I don't know as there's anything specially *queer* in a fellow's riding in the train with the other high school scholars even if two girls he knows are hoofing it—not even if one of them *is* blind," he declared as indignantly as if someone had suggested the contrary.

"Rose can walk just as well for all that. However, Tommy, walking wouldn't be bad for you; and I should suppose the money you would save might be used very conveniently for your experiments," observed Meadowcroft.

"O, wouldn't it!" cried Tommy almost savagely. "But I wouldn't have that, anyway. I mentioned it to dad and he said if he had a son foolish enough to walk five miles a day when he could just as well ride, why he'd soothe his mortification so far as he could by saving money off him. That's the sort of chin a fellow has to stand from parents, you know."

Meadowcroft ignored the issue. Tommy slapped his knee with his cap.

"Hang it!" he cried. "The worst of it is, she has always stood by me, Bet has. Before you came, nobody

else ever took any interest in my magic, and she's the only one that has ever come to see me do tricks more than once. Everybody else expects every single trick to come out just so the very first time, and if they don't, they haven't any more interest at all. And it would make it easier for her, too, because I could walk with Rose part of the time and have her go free. O, and we could each take hold one end of a stick—Rose and me—and sling all three dinner pails on it, and——”

Meadowcroft was smiling slightly. Tommy sighed.

“I suppose I'll come to it. I suppose I'll have to,” he grumbled. “But it won't be until after about three weeks are gone by.”

“I am glad you feel that way. It will certainly be a civil thing to do,” Meadowcroft said kindly.

The boy edged along, pausing at the threshold.

“I daresay you would begin the very first day?” he demanded rather reproachfully.

“I should rather envy the fellow who did,” Meadowcroft replied quietly.

“O gee! I suppose in the end that is just what I shall have to do!” exclaimed Tommy. “And I'll be Baby Brother to the end of the chapter. You wait and see. Well—so long!”

CHAPTER XVI

“**W**HAT’S the matter with you, anyhow, Betty Pogany?” Tommy demanded fiercely. He was the most even-tempered, good-humored lad in the world, but at this time he was secretly deeply troubled about Betty and he cloaked his anxiety under the guise of impatience. “You’re getting almost too thin already. And if you go on——”

He waved his stained hands eloquently with the familiar gesture of the wizard. But his words hadn’t had the effect he desired, and he frowned. Betty’s face had lighted up with happy wonderment at the idea that anyone could speak of her as being thin—as being even remotely likely to become too thin! She had truly lost so many pounds that the charming and very becoming sailor-suit she had had for a school dress had had to be taken in very considerably, that she walked easily and ran with pleasure, but she hadn’t thought of others noticing it. And certainly she had never dreamed that hers should be the bliss of being called thin!

Tommy glanced across the table at her. They were having their Christmas holidays and Betty had come down to see him do tricks, as they called it, though it was seldom he really accomplished what he expected to do. Tommy was himself painfully thin, but that was because he was growing so rapidly. Always rather below the average height for his years, soon after he entered the high school, Tommy had suddenly begun to

shoot up. He had gone so far in the four months that it looked as if he would overtake Betty almost within the year.

At this particular point, the general effect was rather comical. Already he had outgrown the new suit with his first long trousers which he had had in September, his stick-like ankles and wrists being awkwardly apparent. And the contrast was striking between his long, very lank, angular body and the small round head with its sandy thatch of wild-looking hair, with his freckled face, snub nose and very childish mouth. Not that Tommy was aware of it or would have minded in the least if he had been. He had always been happy-go-lucky; but he had never so enjoyed himself as he had done of late. He had walked back and forth between home and school every day during the term, not even joining the others on the train on rainy or stormy days when the girls were not allowed to walk. And this though the money saved, as he never minded repeating, went into his father's pocket—every red cent! He had outlived the nickname, "Teacher's Pet," with which he had been dubbed the first day when seen from a little distance walking with Betty, and he was rather proud of the succeeding "Finnyfish" which he still went by. He saw Mr. Meadowcroft daily and doubled the delight of his days by narrating their events to him. And he had used so prudently the very scant leisure he had to devote to magic that he hadn't once all the term lost the privilege of working at it. And he had had some success (recognizable only to a connoisseur) at that fascinating pursuit.

But of late the boy had been aware that the enthusiastic witness and supporter of the latter as well as the loyal

comrade of his unsuccess was not so ideally happy as everyone else was—everyone else being Rose, Mr. Meadowcroft and himself. Tommy felt vaguely that something was troubling Betty, preying upon her mind—in which he was wiser than his elders. Mr. Meadowcroft had, indeed, realized only a few days before that Betty had changed outwardly to an extent that would have been startling to one who had not seen her in the interval since the summer. It came to him suddenly that the girl was now no larger than she should be for her height, that she really ought not to lose another pound. And he wondered whether he ought to persuade her to go back and forth by the train during the coming term. But he hesitated to do this, knowing how thoroughly, how ardently, indeed, the girl enjoyed the walking. Furthermore, it seemed almost her only enjoyment—practically the only bit of unalloyed, girlish “fun” she had. She was so absorbed in Rose Harrow, so intent upon helping her with her lessons, enabling her to partake of whatever was anywhere offered, and enriching her life that she seemed to have little more young life of her own than she had formerly had except for the long walks of which the three friends made real and vigorous sport.

Tommy leaned upon the handsome piece of felt Mr. Meadowcroft had given him for his work table.

“The first thing you know, your father’ll up and put a stop to your walking to school and then you’ll be sorry,” he declared.

Betty started. Her face sobered almost to sadness.

“But, Tommy, if it’s true, I should think father’d only be glad,” she protested. “He was always ashamed to have me so big. I just wish I could grow shorter, too.”

"Well, he won't stand for your getting sick, Betty Pogany, and that's just what it's coming to if you don't watch out," the boy declared.

"But how can I, Tommy? You don't mean I ought to give up walking?" cried the girl anxiously.

"It ain't that," he declared, "but I can tell you just what it is that ails you. You're—you're just killing yourself because of Rose. You're so blooming sorry for her you don't have her off your mind one single minute, and you don't take one mite of comfort for yourself. And, gee! you might have such a high time always. All the fellows say you're the most popular girl in our class—among everybody, boys and girls and teachers—and you don't make anything out of it at all. Gee whiz! I'd like your chance! If I could be a spell-binder as easy as you could, you'd see a thing or two happen!"

Betty had colored charmingly. What Tommy had said of her popularity was quite true. Moreover, she was as pretty as any girl in the class. She was over-tall, but she was sufficiently slender and very graceful and the fine straight lines of her figure accorded well with her fine, sweet, child-like face.

"O, Tommy, it's really Rose, not me," she protested earnestly. "It's because we're always together. Everybody was always wild about Rose at home, you know, she was so pretty and bright and lively. And she's all that now, and is so wonderful besides and, O, so brave!"

"Well, it isn't all on account of her that they like you," persisted Tommy, "but that ain't what we're talking about this minute. What I want to know is why you go on so, thinking of her all the time and how perfectly awful it is to be blind? And you make it a lot

worse by never saying a thing to anybody about it, just shutting it all up inside you so that only a magician like T. Finnyfish, Esquire, could ever make out what the matter was, or that there was any trouble. Now, Betty, let me tell you where you are foolish. You mind it a heap worse than Rose does herself—no end worse!”

Tommy spoke truly. As a matter of fact, Rose Harrow had never in her life been happier than during the autumn just past. Of course the contrast helped. After that wretched, dreary six months of enforced idleness and loneliness and inertia, the girl was back at her studies again, which must inevitably hold more intense interest. Always, as Betty had said, a favorite, she was the more so under the circumstances. She had her part in practically everything going on among the school children and took ingenuous satisfaction in surprising her teachers and companions by unexpected acts, circumventing her handicap in all sorts of curious and original ways. She played the piano for the opening exercises of the school in the morning and for the upper classes in gymnastics, and was herself the star performer among the girls in her class. And though Mr. Meadowcroft felt with secret dissatisfaction and sometimes with irritation that Rose took Betty's devotion and constant self-sacrifice as a matter of course, in reality the girl valued Betty's warm friendship as the best thing in her life and the basis of all her other happiness. Her high spirits never flagged and no one but Betty Pogany questioned her happiness at all. Her father and mother not only believed in it but shared it. Only Betty felt Rose's gaiety to be forced and suffered vicariously for her as only a sensitive and reserved soul such as hers can suffer.

The fifteen-minute period was over, and five minutes extra, and still the brownish, opaque liquid was unchanged. Again the experiment was a failure. Betty rose regretfully. She had to go home to do her practising.

Tommy accompanied her. They did not speak until they were on the porch at the Poganys' and Betty was dutifully cleaning her overshoes on the iron scraper.

"Betty, do you know what I believe? I believe that some day Rose's sight will come back to her!" Tommy declared eagerly.

"O, Tommy!" cried the girl breathlessly. That possibility had never occurred to her.

"I am just about sure of it," the boy went on, gaining credence in his own statement from her manner of receiving it.

Betty clasped her gloved hands.

"It stands to reason," quoth the oracle. "Look at her eyes—just as good as yours or mine. Now all the blind people I ever saw had their eyes tight shut."

"O," murmured Betty wonderingly. "I never saw anyone but Rose."

Tommy considered. "Well, come to think of it, I can't just remember seeing 'em myself. But anyhow I have in books, and of course books are more reliable. And what I was going to say was that Rose's eyes being wide open and turning hither and yon and looking just exactly the same and doing everything anybody's eyes do except seeing, why, it stands to reason that some day she must see, too. I suppose there's some little obstacle between her brain and her eyes, and what I think is that some sort of shock is going to do the trick, you know. I

have thought of firing a pistol, if I could lay my hands on one, or even busting a bag right close to her ear when she don't know anybody's round. But I'd sort of hate to do that. I'd feel mean even if it was for her own good, and anyhow I think a natural shock would be much better, like thunder when she thinks it's a fine day. O, or in winter! Dad knew it to thunder once in February. Wouldn't that be grand, Betty!"

Betty drew a deep breath.

"O, Tommy, I wouldn't even mind a small little earthquake, would you?" she cried.

"Not I," said Tommy gaily and went off whistling with shrill cheerfulness. It wasn't only that Betty's ready acceptance of his prophecy gave him a sense of importance, but he felt he had really accomplished something. Instead of worrying now about poor Rose, she would be eagerly looking forward to the day when her sight should be restored.

CHAPTER XIX

TOMMY had done wonders at his lessons during the first term at the high school and he had accomplished more than usual with his magic. And in any event his persistence and perseverance in the latter pursuit were impressive. For one experiment he had wanted a glass disc to be obtained by knocking the bottom out of a bottle, and after a year's effort had recently succeeded with the seventy-third bottle—which had happened to be one Betty had given him. Wherefore, respect had been added to the affection Betty had always felt for her friend; and his words of encouragement in the case of Rose Harrow were to her mind the conclusions of a scientific observer and thinker.

Wherefore, those Christmas holidays were the happiest days the girl remembered. Even the futility of expecting an unseasonable thunderclap with the thermometer varying only between ten and twenty-five degrees above zero did not chill her happiness; for there was abundance of time, and anticipation was blissful. It was hard to refrain from confiding in Rose, but of course it would be hazardous if not fatal for her to expect the shock. Moreover, she seemed so happy that Betty believed she had a vague sense of something wonderful before her. And never a night passed when Betty did not pray for some unseasonable catastrophe or cataclysm which should bring joy to Rose without working harm elsewhere.

Mr. Meadowcroft first remarked a change in Betty on the day when he was leaving South Paulding for a journey to Philadelphia—the day before the New Year. He first realized, too, because of its absence, that for some time there must have been a slight shadow of anxiety upon the girl's brow. But he said to himself it would return again when school opened. During the holidays the constant strain of Rose Harrow's companionship had fallen from her, and unconsciously she expressed her relief. Betty and Tommy were at the train to see him off, and though he waved his hand gaily from the window, as soon as he turned he sighed and fell into troubled meditation. Betty Pogany was an over-burdened young girl, and apparently he was the only person to be aware of the fact. Bent on undue self-sacrifice, there was none to check her in her headlong career unless he should make the attempt. And what could he do?

Meadowcroft wished he were not going away. Furthermore, he had another reason for regretting that an appointment with a specialist took him to Philadelphia at this time. He would have liked to wait at least until after the return of Mr. Appleton, principal of the high school, who had seemed far from well for a fortnight before he had gone home for the holidays. In this case, too, he seemed almost alone in realizing the difficulty; for Mrs. Appleton was always so concerned with her own ailments that her husband would have had to be on his back in bed before it would have occurred to her that he wasn't well.

Already Meadowcroft's acquaintance with the schoolmaster had ripened into warm friendship. All through the autumn, he had been a frequent visitor at the high

school, at first after hours, but presently a deeply interested observer during the sessions. And though at first he had had the carriage wait for him, after a short time he sent it back at once and went home on the train the South Paulding children took, walking to the train at Paulding and from the station to his sister's. The first halting progress through the town of Paulding with its loafers and staring groups had been difficult; just as his first excursion across the floor of the main room of the high school with seventy-odd pairs of curious young eyes upon him had been an ordeal. But thereafter both processes had become progressively easier; and at this time he was vaguely aware that the uneven pound of his crutches on the school-room floor was a familiar and welcome sound both to master and pupils, all the latter of whom he could now call by name.

The year just closing had been that of a presidential election. Mr. Appleton wishing to go home to vote, had astonished Meadowcroft by asking him to take charge of the school for the day and to hear his classes. Overcoming some natural shrinking, Mr. Meadowcroft had complied with the request, and the day stood out from all others as a red-letter day in his life. Since then he had thrice taken classes: once, when Mr. Appleton wished to attend a funeral and twice during the last week of school when the principal's cold had threatened to take away his voice.

Before he had gone far, it came to Humphrey Meadowcroft that it was something new for him to be leaving with regret a place that had become home to him. For years a journey had meant to him neither regret nor anticipation. It had been simply a bridge be-

tween monotonies. He was fortunate to feel so loath to go, to be looking ahead eagerly already to the day when he might return again. For it meant that he had friends, and friends made South Paulding a home for one who had long been homeless. One friend would have meant much to his lonely heart, and he had three—three royal as well as loyal friends!

CHAPTER XX

ROSE HARROW wouldn't have felt slighted had she known that Mr. Meadowcroft didn't think of including her among his friends. She realized, as Betty did not, that he didn't care for her as he did for Tommy and Betty, but she did not resent his preference for them. She was grateful to him for persuading her mother to allow her to go to school, but she wasn't particularly drawn to him. Secretly she thought him "stuck-up" and she felt she would be bored to go to see him as Tommy and Betty did constantly. And when Betty had asked her to go to the station on the day he went away, Rose had decided it was too near supper time and she wouldn't go.

As the train pulled out, the boy and girl on the platform looked into one another's eyes with a sudden sense of loss and loneliness upon them. And when Betty recollected that Mr. Meadowcroft was to see a surgeon, it came to her that he would probably suffer terribly, and she clasped her hands with a look of despair.

As Tommy gazed at her in perplexity, on a sudden a light came to his eyes, and he gave vent to a whoop that recalled his grammar school days before he had acquired the dignity of the long trousers that were now so short.

"Golly, I almost forgot!" he cried. "Come into the depot, Bet, while I show you something. I found it in the woodshed just now—that's why I was so late. I was reading something in a paper that was wrapped

round a box of axle-grease dad got over in Millville the week before Christmas. His wheel got stuck. He gave me blazes for not oiling the wagon, but perhaps I ain't glad now that I forgot! Come on in quick."

Millville, an ugly, unsightly factory village a mile and a half north of Paulding, was scarcely more than a name to South Paulding people. With trembling hands, Tommy drew forth a copy of its weekly paper, unfolded and spread it out upon a bench in the station, calling Betty's attention to an advertisement in conspicuous type embellished by a picture of a bearded, benevolent-looking man in spectacles.

Dr. Vandegrift of London, Paris, New York, and San Francisco, large type immediately below declared him, and announced that he would be in the parlors of the Eagle Hotel, Millville, for the week beginning December 26th, to fit glasses and to treat all affections and diseases of the eye. Finer print following gave an account of the doctor's education and enumerated the degrees he had received from foreign universities and the decorations from various potentates. It narrated many marvelous cures he had effected, including more than one case of total blindness, and predicted yet more marvelous things to come because of his recently perfected invention. There were, of course, other eye-cups (so-called) on the market, but this eye-cup of Dr. Vandegrift differed in one vital particular from anything of the sort ever patented. It was warranted to cure a list of ailments and diseases of the eye that occupied six lines of the advertisement; and the friends of the blind were urged to bring forward all but inveterate cases.

The look that Betty gave Tommy might have made an

angel weep—or sing. She folded the paper solemnly and handed it to him. Then silently but with one accord they hastened towards the Pogany dictionary to look up “inveterate.”

Betty lighted a lamp, and together they turned over the pages of the big book. Tommy put a greenish-yellow finger at the margin beside the word.

“*Long-established?* It ain’t a year yet. *Deep-rooted?* Not on your tin-type!” he declared. “*Obstinate?* I shouldn’t call it obstinate, should you?”

“I don’t believe Rose could turn her eyes if it were obstinate,” Betty opined.

“Nor they wouldn’t look as they do,” he added eagerly. “Obstinate is the very thing they ain’t. That’s sure enough.”

And Tommy began to dance wildly about the room. Impelled to join him, Betty remembered her aunt and held up a warning hand.

“Aunt Sarah will be down here in five minutes, Tommy,” she whispered, “so we can’t waste any time, though I was never so excited in my life. Let’s sit right here on the sofa and make our plans quick. When will we take Rose over to Millville? To-morrow?”

“Sure. That’s the last day Dr. Vandegrift’s there,” he said.

“O, Tommy!” cried Betty with tears in her shining eyes. “It’s all too beautiful. It seems more than I can bear. Just listen—everything is right. Aunt Sarah is going over to Greenmeadow to-morrow to spend the day. All I shall have to do will be to get father’s dinner. Then I’ll just ask him if I may spend the afternoon with Rose, and we’ll take her over.”

Tommy sprang suddenly from the sofa as if he had sat on a pin. And his expression was in accord.

"O, Betty! O me! O my!" he cried dolefully, "I can't go! There's no way possible. I've got to work all day right under dad's eye. He's going to clean the shed upstairs and down and the loft in the barn. I couldn't sneak away or get away or anything."

"But, Tommy! how can we go without you?" the girl cried. "Perhaps if your father understood——"

Tommy considered. "I don't believe it would be safe to tell him—or even to say anything about it to anybody until afterwards," he concluded. "Of course if Mr. Meadowcroft was here it would be different."

"You're sure to-morrow's the last day?"

Tommy verified the fact by newspaper and calendar.

"Well, you'll just have to go without me," he declared dejectedly. "You can go on the one-thirty train and change at Paulding for the through train north. I guess you'll have to walk back to Paulding and then get the four o'clock from there."

"Here comes Aunt Sarah!" said Betty, and Tommy made for the door.

"Will you go over to Rose's after supper with me, Tommy?" Betty asked in the entry. "You could explain to Mrs. Harrow better than I."

Tommy frowned. "I don't believe anybody'd better do any explaining to her until after you've got back from Millville," he said. "It would be awful to tell Mrs. Harrow and then have her disappointed. There might be some hitch. The doctor might not be there. He might 'a been taken sick since that notice in the paper came out or he might 'a been sandbagged by a thug. He

must be rich, and anyhow all those decorations must be valuable. I suppose they're set with precious stones, don't you?"

"I don't know," said Betty. "My mind doesn't seem to take in anything else but just that Rose is going to be cured. And about her mother—it might be too much for her to have Rose come home with her sight restored. It might go to her heart."

"There's something in that," Tommy admitted. "O, I know how we can get around that. If the doctor cures Rose, you two stop at my house first when you get back. I'll go along over to Mrs. Harrow's and talk with her a while and break it to her very gently that you have gone over Paulding way with Rose to see a doctor that cures blindness and that she had better be prepared for anything. Then I'll give the signal—probably by coming out the door—and you'll walk right in."

"We'll all almost die of joy, I am sure!" cried Betty.

CHAPTER XXI

IT was hard to wait, but Betty decided to say nothing to Rose until next day. She merely asked her to spend the following afternoon with her, begging her to come early because Aunt Sarah was away and she would be alone as soon as her father returned to the shop.

The moment the two girls were alone, Betty divulged the secret. Rose was delighted and shared Betty's confidence, but she was the less enthusiastic of the two. As she didn't, in truth, suffer nearly so keenly because of her blindness as Betty suffered for her, so release from it did not seem so wildly thrilling a possibility as it seemed to the other.

They went by a roundabout way to the station, took the Paulding train, and waited there for the train for the north which stopped at Millville.

Betty had never been in the village street before. It was shockingly dirty as well as ugly, and the girl felt it a sad pity that it should be the first sight that would greet Rose after her long sitting in darkness. The Eagle Hotel, too, would have seemed extremely dingy elsewhere, though here it gained something from the contrast with the surrounding buildings; and its parlor though not plural, as the advertisement indicated, nor spacious, was fairly tidy and too faded and neutral to be offensive. Moreover, Dr. Vandegrift himself fell far short of the glamor of the newspaper portrait. But Betty

felt no disappointment. His glasses with the wide black ribbon connected, and his pointed beard made him the ideal specialist to her, and though she knew Tommy would be disappointed in regard to the medals, she felt it more dignified of the doctor not to wear them. And Rose declared afterwards that she knew from the sound of his voice just how wonderful he was.

Rose was extremely easy in her movements, and when Betty explained that her friend was blind, the doctor was almost discourteous. As a matter of fact, he believed these well-dressed, well-bred strangers, who were obviously not of Millville, were trying to play a trick upon him. Indeed, Betty's height and the direct gaze of the smaller girl led him to suspect that they acted as detectives. Then he looked sharply at the tall lady and saw that she was only a child, with a child's innocent honesty in every line of her fair face, and he knew that she spoke the truth—that it wasn't in her to do otherwise. And he wasn't surprised when, with a quick, unexpected motion, he brought his hand so close to the little girl's eyes that it almost grazed the lashes, she did not flinch. His tone changed immediately to that of utter suavity, as he put a few questions—professional-sounding questions.

Then he took them into a small inner room which was darkened, placed Rose in a big chair that made her feel as if she were going to have a tooth pulled, and putting an extra glass over one eye, flashed a light into hers and peered into them in turn. As he did so, he asked a great many questions as to the condition of her eyes before the attack of scarlet fever, and whether she remembered falling and striking on the back of her head. Then he

wished to know whether she ever had spots or patches of color before her now, and whether there were any pressure on either side of her head, and many other questions which should, it seemed, have been simple to answer, but which were somehow very difficult for Rose. As she said to Betty afterwards, she no sooner answered a question than she felt she had stated the very opposite of the truth and ought to take it back. And once when he said: "You are quite sure it wasn't the right?" she had declared that it was right and that was just what she had meant to say.

Finally he put out the light and raised the blind. Betty's heart sank. He was through and he hadn't even tried the eye-cup. Rose's blindness was inveterate!

Dr. Vandegrift met her appealing gaze calmly.

"Well, young ladies, I make no promises," he said in a large way. "The deeper one delves into science, the more one learns from nature, the more modest a man becomes, and the less inclined to boast. Now this is all I am willing to say. Of the four cases of blindness which I have treated and cured with my recently invented Galvano Eye-Cup, every one was much more serious than this young lady's appears to be. If I could treat her once a week for six months, I feel assured that at the end of that time she would see as well as I do. Nay, better, for she wouldn't even require glasses. As I said, it is not my habit to make promises, though I confess I am strongly tempted to do so in this case."

Betty drew a long breath. Of course, they should have realized that the cure *couldn't* be instantaneous. But six months! Then she recollected that Rose had been blind only twice that period. And it was wicked

to feel impatient of waiting only six months for the most marvelous happening possible.

"Are you going to be here, doctor?" she asked anxiously.

"I leave the hotel and the city to-morrow," he returned. "But I have found so many cases here that need continued treatment that I shall return to Millville for one day each week."

He handed Betty a dingy card.

"I shall be at this address every Wednesday, and if you wish to make a regular appointment, I can see you at any time between two and four in the afternoon—the mornings are all taken. But unless you are sure of coming regularly for the six months, you may as well not come again."

"O, we will!" cried Betty. "Could you see us at this same time?"

He consulted a little book. "Yes, I can give you from quarter past two until quarter before three every Wednesday," he declared. "My charges when I use the eye-cup continually, as I shall have to do with the young lady, are five dollars a visit."

Betty grew white.

"I am not sure that we can come, then. I don't believe we could pay that," she faltered. "But perhaps Rose's mother would feel she could. She doesn't know of our coming—nobody does—and I wasn't sure as we'd better tell her just at first. But I guess we'll have to. And—I am almost sure she will, but I don't feel as if we ought to make the appointment to-day."

"Well, I am deeply interested in the case, and I'll tell you what I'll do," he declared. "I'll reduce it to three

dollars. I believe you are right in feeling it would be better not to tell the young lady's mother or anyone else about it until we are fairly near the end of the cure. There will come a time, of course, when it can't be hidden. But for the present we'll say nothing. I can't afford to use the battery connected with the cup for less than three dollars, but if you will come every week and pay cash, I will do it for that—just to cover the cost of operation to me."

"You are very good," Betty cried impulsively.

"I don't know," he said, "I don't know, I'm sure. I am interested in humanity, but I sometimes think it is my overwhelming interest in science that dominates me. And this case appeals to me scientifically, I must confess."

Betty had made rapid calculations which seemed to justify her in making the appointment. She couldn't, indeed, see ahead six months, but surely she was right in taking some risk. Certainly she would do great wrong to lose this wonderful opportunity.

"Then we will come next Wednesday and every Wednesday," she said. "You can put us down, Rose Harrow and Betty Pogany, Wednesdays at quarter-past two." And she took Rose's hand, helped her out of the chair, and handed her her scarlet tam-o'-shanter.

"For this visit and the examination, however," Dr. Vandegrift went on, "I shall have to ask you five dollars, which is half the customary fee."

Again Betty's heart sank. She had brought with her ten dollars which had been a Christmas present and which she had supposed would pay for the cure when she thought it was to be a matter of one visit. Then she had

felt that it would help make out the weekly deficit. She and Rose could count on the car-fares they could save, which wouldn't be the full ninety cents because they would have to ride more or less during the winter months, and she had twenty-five cents a week besides. Rose was a little spendthrift, and hadn't a penny on hand, and Betty had less than a dollar outside of her gift. But she drew forth half her capital and handed it to him without a word.

He received it gravely and recorded their names.

"One thing more," he added, with his hands on the door, "if I reduce my charges, you must promise me not only that you will not mention that fact to anybody, but that you will not let anybody know that you are coming here to me for treatment. In short, you must promise to say nothing to anybody about it."

"I suppose we can—well, just sort of hint to Rose's mother?" Betty asked.

"Not for the world—not for at least five months. If you let anyone know anything about it, you will run the risk of losing the treatment and Miss Rose will never regain her sight—which would be more than a pity. It would be a crime. I will tell you why I insist. The doctors about here are all madly jealous of me and are doing everything they can to make things disagreeable for me. They have made it impossible for me to keep these rooms after to-day, and they think they are rid of me for good. They don't know of the rooms I have secured on Parrot Street, you see. And you come from South Paulding. Isn't there a Dr. Mellen there?"

The girls admitted the fact.

"Well, it seems he is president of the county medical

society which puts him in a position to be especially disagreeable. He's a bigoted fellow, and between you and I, ignorant as he can be—that is, in all that pertains to the eyes. If he knew I was to be here once a week, Dr. Mellen would move heaven and earth until he drove me out. He's got money and influence, and unfortunately I am poor. What with my soft heart and my scientific mind, I keep myself poor by my charity. Now with you I won't really make a cent. I shall just cover what electricity my battery consumes."

"You are awfully good," declared Betty earnestly, "and we won't say a word, of course. Only there's one gentleman who doesn't really belong in South Paulding. He hasn't been there long and doesn't associate with the people and when he wants a doctor goes way to Philadelphia. He is our best friend. May we tell just him? He'd never breathe it."

"I am sorry, but I couldn't risk it. You see there are others depending on me to heal their eyes also, and for their sake I must not take any risks. If you are not willing to give me your unconditional promise, I can't do anything for you. If you will kindly hand me my card, we will say good-bye at once," he said very severely.

"O no, sir!" cried Betty in alarm. "Of course we'll promise. We wouldn't be so selfish, with all the other people wanting treatment. I only——"

"Very well," he said, smiling pleasantly, "then I'll show you how much I appreciate your action. If you give me your promise, I will also give you mine. If you both give me your word, and if you come each week regularly, I will promise you solemnly to make the cure."

"I promise," said Betty fervently, and Rose repeated the words. Dr. Vandegrift opened the door with a flourish and shook hands with them. They passed through the parlor, where a woman waited with a child with bandaged eyes, and out into the dirty street again.

CHAPTER XXII

TOMMY went to the station to meet the four o'clock train from Paulding. Not finding the girls, he walked out of the village a little way over the familiar highway between the village and the town. He caught sight of them, but his heart sank. They were walking arm in arm. And though Betty saw him, there was no change in Rose's manner until the other girl had had time to apprise her of his presence. It looked as if her blindness were inveterate!

He didn't hurry until he saw that Betty's face was bright. Then he bounded towards them as eagerly as awkwardly.

"What luck?" he asked.

Betty was prepared to meet him, but it was hard to speak.

"Tommy, I am just awfully sorry, but we can't tell you anything, we can't say one single thing," she said soberly. "And please don't say a word to anyone about the advertisement in the paper nor the doctor. It might be—O, perfectly dreadful, the very worst thing you could think of if you did. But it's all right. Rose and I are—not excited as we were, but happy."

"All right. Mum's the word!" said the disappointed Tommy bravely. "I'll never mention the paper nor anything. But—you are glad I found it?"

"Sure, Tommy," said Rose.

"More than glad. We're thankful beyond words," Betty added solemnly.

"You got through early, Tommy," observed Rose. "You said your father would keep you at it till the six o'clock whistle blew."

"Wonders will never cease," remarked Tommy. "Dad not only let me off early, but he even praised me for the way I'd worked—something he never did before within the memory of man. Not that he made any great splurge. He had to be grudging about it, or it wouldn't have been dad."

"Well, how did you work?" questioned Rose.

"I worked like a dog. I never worked so hard in my life before," Tommy owned ingenuously. "You see my mind was on—other things. I kept wondering where you were and what you were doing and what was happening, and all the time, without thinking what I was doing, I kept working harder and faster. It ain't that way at all when I think of magic. That doesn't speed up work, and I don't care. Gee! I don't want to work at the rate I have to-day. Not on your tin-type. But I ain't so sorry to-day."

"Why, Tommy?" Betty asked soberly. For she feared his disappointment was so great that he welcomed physical weariness to offset it.

"Well, I'll tell you. Seeing dad in such a pleasant frame of mind, says I to myself, 'Here's your chance, Finnyfish!' So I up and proposed to him that he give me my car-fares I save by walking next term, same as your father and Rose's do. And by gee! he up and promised! I'm weak yet from the shock!"

"O, Tommy! how splendid! You'll be buying a book

on magic about every other week, won't you?" asked Betty gaily.

"Who knows? I'm so used to going on with a mere pittance that I may become a miser," returned Tommy musingly. As a matter of fact an explanation of the girls' apparently unsuccessful return had flashed through his mind. Perhaps it cost a lot more than Betty had thought of to be cured of blindness. Specialists were very expensive, he knew, and like as not ten dollars wasn't so much to this be-decorated Vandegrift as a dime was to him. Quite likely his fee for this cure, which was of course at the top of his list, was as much as twenty-five or fifty dollars. That evening he dropped into the Poganys' and, the moment Aunt Sarah went out into the kitchen to make bread, turned to Betty.

"I told you this afternoon how I was so used to going without that railroad money that I hardly know what to do with it," he said. "Well, it's the truth that I don't care a mite about it except for the satisfaction of getting it out of dad. If you and Rose have any use for it, you can have the whole ninety cents every week."

"O, Tommy, what a true, true friend you are!" cried the girl with tears in her soft eyes. "We don't need it right now, but if we should later, it would be such a comfort to know that we might have it."

"When in doubt, consult Finnyfish," quoth Tommy. He said no more, but decided secretly to save the money each week and have it ready in case of emergency.

As for Betty, this made it only seem the harder that they couldn't confide in Tommy. But of course he knew in part. He couldn't help guessing something very like the truth. They couldn't discuss this visit and others

with him and he couldn't ask questions. But he couldn't help knowing the meaning of their weekly secret visits to Millville. And he would realize that there was hope for Rose, but that the cure would take time.

But Mr. Meadowcroft wouldn't know one thing. He hadn't had an inkling and wouldn't have. No one would be more gratified, more sympathetic than he; and yet he could know nothing about it. He must not even know that they had a secret. And that secret must be kept from him for six months.

CHAPTER XXIII

BY this time it had come to be generally if tacitly understood both in South Paulding and at the high school that Rose Harrow should have everything she wanted within the limits of possibility, and that everyone and everything should give way before her. Because of her one great deprivation, she must not be allowed to suffer any lesser one. And Rose being so gay and quick and bright and good-humored, such an attitude on the part of her parents and teachers as well as her friends and schoolmates was the more natural and to be expected. No one in either village had even thought of questioning the wisdom of such procedure with the exception of Humphrey Meadowcroft. He wasn't sure that it was quite wholesome for the girl. It appeared to him as if they were rather overdoing it. But being conscious of slight prejudice on his own part towards Rose, he had never spoken of the matter to anyone, not even to Mr. Appleton, with whom he would naturally have discussed it.

Such being the situation, it was not strange that Rose's closest friend, Betty Pogany, who thought of little else than Rose and Rose's interests, who was, perhaps, in certain ways more concerned for her than even the girl's mother, should have believed that Rose's interests had right of way before anything else whatever. As a consequence of this, though ordinarily the most biddable and docile of maidens, when Betty was working in behalf

of Rose she bore herself unconsciously as if she had royal prerogative of action. And now, when it was to her mind a question of the restoration of Rose's sight, Betty was, unawares, ready to become an anarchist with regard to ordinary duties and claims.

School opened again on the Monday following the secret visit to Millville. Already Betty had made her plans for the first Wednesday visit to Dr. Vandegrift, and had in mind tentative plans for the remaining Wednesdays of the winter term. It being now absolutely imperative for Rose and herself to walk back and forth upon every possible occasion, they could not risk losing the privilege on any account—which meant that they must always be at home by four o'clock. That would add to the difficulty of the secret weekly visit to Millville. They could take the two o'clock train from Paulding, but there was no returning train that would help them. The treatment over, they would have to walk the four miles from Millville to South Paulding at top speed in order to get home at four.

School did not close until half-past two, but in the preceding term the last forty minutes of every day excepting Friday had been a study period for the freshmen. Betty took it for granted that the same schedule would prevail this term, and felt that it would be a simple manner to get away early on Wednesdays. Wherefore, she was greatly disappointed to learn that the class in Latin Composition, which the fourth year pupils were to begin this term, was to meet once a week on Wednesdays at the last period. Betty sighed at the complication. She liked Latin, and she was very sorry to miss this course, which had only the one recitation. Mr.

Meadowcroft would be disappointed, too,—but no, he mustn't know. And after all what was Latin Composition, what was anything in the world in comparison with the restoration of Rose's sight? Betty felt that she could cheerfully give up school itself for the six months if it were required.

On Wednesday morning at recess, she went to Mr. Appleton and asked if she and Rose might be excused at the close of the one o'clock recitation.

"Let me see. The last period is a study hour, is it not?" he asked kindly.

"Well, no, Mr. Appleton, it isn't," Betty returned, coloring, for she had been willing to let him infer that such was the fact. "But—this is very important. I want to take Rose somewhere."

The school-master would not have excused any other pupils in those circumstances. But he had so much sympathy for Rose and such confidence in Betty, who was as remarkable, as nearly perfect, in her conduct as in her lessons, that he yielded at once. He had no doubt whatever that the occasion was important and concerned Rose's welfare.

"But it is not usual, you know, Miss Pogany," he added, smiling. "As a matter of fact it is against the rules to be excused from school when it involves missing a lesson unless the pupil brings a written request from parent or guardian. So please remember to come armed with that if you wish to ask again."

That was rather disconcerting with all the other Wednesdays stretching ahead. But for the nonce, Betty disregarded it. For to-day they were safe. And much as both Betty and Rose enjoyed school, it added some-

thing to the excitement of their adventure to leave the building just as the rest of their class was filing into the recitation room.

They seemed hardly to be on the train before they were off again. It was so short a ride, and money was so imperative, that Betty grudged the five cents apiece for their tickets. She had hardly taken out the doctor's card to find the number on Parrot Street and returned it to her pocket, when the conductor shouted "Millville!" in the condescending manner in which she was to learn he always said it. It was a through train and express a great part of the distance it ran. Scarcely anyone ever got off at Millville, and yet something about the road forced every northbound train to stop there.

The main street had seemed last week untidy almost to the limit of possibility; but Parrot Street, which was really an alley, was as much worse as Main Street was worse than the wide, lovely avenue which was the principal street of South Paulding. Betty wondered if even the daring Rose wouldn't have felt appalled had she been able to see it. But Rose only said "Quelque smell!" in her funny way and danced lightly over the uneven ridges of frozen mire.

The building whose sagging door bore traces of the number they sought was ramshackle indeed; the stairs were dark, rickety and dirty, and the corridor of the second story unventilated and ill-smelling. But they came to a clean-looking door with light shining through opaque glass, and though it had no designation on it, Betty was right in taking it for Dr. Vandegrift's office. Within, it was neat and not unattractive. The doctor greeted them warmly like old friends.

"It cheers my heart to see such bright, happy faces," he declared. "It does me good. It braces and strengthens me to combat the obloquy which pursues me. And the best of it is that I have the assurance of making it possible for Miss Rose to look upon Miss Betty's yet happier face in the course of a few months."

He moved out the chair upholstered in red plush which he had had at the Eagle Hotel, and gently helped Rose into it.

"Since I last saw you young ladies, I have been reading certain eminent Hungarian authorities on the eye," he went on, "and meditating on their conclusions, which are similar to my own, though in inventing my Galvano Eye-Cup, I have advanced a step—a long step—beyond them. I will only say what you have probably already inferred, that my confidence is unbounded."

He wheeled the chair about, moved a small stand close to it and placed on it a heavy wooden box which he explained was his battery. Drawing down the blinds, he put a handle connected by wires with the box into each of the girl's hands.

"Don't grasp them. Hold them gently until I take them from you," he bade her. Then he held a small glass cup to one of her eyes until it fastened itself there by suction. Ten minutes passed in absolute silence. During this period, Dr. Vandegrift kept his eyes constantly upon his patient, flash-light in hand and face very grave. Ever and anon he adjusted a glass over his eye and peered into Rose's free eye. Rose, despite the warning, clutched the handles as for dear life. Betty's heart throbbed wildly.

At the end of ten minutes, Dr. Vandegrift removed

the cup, took away the handles, and bade Rose sit erect for a minute. Then he applied the cup to the other eye, gave her the handles, in reversed order, he explained, and repeated the process. Ten minutes later, he removed the apparatus, raised the blinds and announced that that was all for this time.

Betty handed him three dollars, then helped Rose into her scarlet reefer jacket and handed her her tam-o'-shanter.

"Thank you," he said absently, adding: "Miss Rose responds to the treatment wonderfully—marvelously. I am the more glad to be able to tell you this because I discovered to-day after taking the cup from the right eye and throwing a violet ray upon the retina, that you came only just in the nick of time. Miss Rose's eyes were just ready to deteriorate. The left one had, in fact, begun. I won't say that if you had not come until a week later, it would have been doubtful; but two weeks hence, I shouldn't have dared make any promises. Three weeks later I could only have sent you home. Treatment would have been wasted. Shall I look for you at the same time next week?"

"Yes indeed, sir," responded Betty solemnly, scarcely able to contemplate what might have been.

"I wonder if you would mind, Dr. Vandegrift," she added hesitatingly, "my saying to Mr. Appleton——"

"My dear Miss Betty, if you are going to talk that way this interview will be the last," he interrupted very severely. "You gave me your word."

"I know. But—he's the school-master," said Betty meekly.

"I thought you understood," he said with sadness that was almost bitter.

"O, I do!" cried Betty. "Of course I won't. And I shouldn't have asked you that. I won't again, I promise you. It's nothing, of course. And when I think that Rose will be cured——"

He smiled kindly.

"Don't come any later, please," he said as he opened the door, "for every minute of my time is taken and I must be through with you ten minutes before the next patient arrives so that I may re-charge the battery. A case of blindness, you may not be aware, consumes as much fluid as would otherwise be used in a day."

And smiling blandly, he bowed them out.

CHAPTER XXIV

TOMMY had told Betty of a cross road which avoided Paulding and saved half a mile. As soon as the girls were out of the dirty village and facing home, Betty turned eagerly to Rose.

"How do you feel, Rose?" she asked anxiously.

"Slick!" returned the other promptly. "After I got over being scared and got used to it, I sort of liked it. It was kind of soothing. But my goodness! I was scared blue to take hold of those handles. I suppose I couldn't have let go if I had tried until he shut off the electricity. And lightning is electricity, you know, and I kept remembering that was what I had my hands on. Could you hear my heart beat?"

"No, Rose, I was scared myself. And anyhow, mine was beating so loud I was ashamed. I was afraid Dr. Vandegrift would think I didn't trust him. Couldn't you hear it?"

"Nix." And Rose laughed gaily.

"I kept thinking of Tommy," observed Betty rather mournfully. "Wouldn't it all have interested him—reversing the handles for the left eye, and all that?"

"Yes, and about taking so much liquid—fluid I mean—for me, and—O, Betty, I am so happy now that I shall probably just *bust* when I am cured, and what then?" Rose rattled on excitedly.

"It's a good long time to wait. I feel now as if I should be just as excited and happy as I am now all the

six months, and as if I wanted to be just awfully good to everybody—even Aunt Sarah. But it's harder for you to wait so long. I hope you can keep up your spirits, though," Betty returned wistfully.

"O, Betty darling, don't worry about my spirits. I don't mind waiting one mite. It's not so bad, you know, being blind. It's really sort of fun when one has such a chum as you. And the thing I am most anxious to see is you in sailor-suits with your hair down your back. And yet, I can imagine even that, for you *sound* so young and limber now—and so pretty!"

Betty laughed. And somehow Rose knew in her heart how prettily she flushed, too.

"It's dear of you to say that, Rose," she murmured, squeezing her arm. "Well, we must be just tremendously careful not to miss a single Wednesday, mustn't we?"

"Sure. Only, Betty, however *can* we be perfectly sure of coming every week if Mr. Appleton won't let us off without an excuse? Would you dare ask mama to write one?"

"O no, not for the world!" cried Betty. "That would be breaking our word to Dr. Vandegrift, I'm afraid. But we've got to go every week and we just will. I don't see just how we will manage at this minute; but there isn't any question, of course, Rose, when it means getting back your sight. And we've got to be awfully careful not to do anything Dr. Vandegrift wouldn't approve of or he'll get mad and have nothing more to do with us. Geniuses are so very apt to be like that, you know."

They turned into the highway that ran through South

Paulding and were on familiar ground. But it seemed unfamiliar without Tommy.

"Don't you think anything more about our getting there, Rose darling," Betty admonished her. "You keep just as calm and happy as you can so as not to retard the cure, and I'll think up a plan. Dear me! if only I could get Tommy to help. He's so clever. I don't know whether it was because he was so quick-witted that he took to magic, or whether it was that that made him so unusually clever; but he always knows just what to do. He's really a wizard already. And he would be so interested, scientifically as well as other ways, and—well, when you think that he was the one that found out about Dr. Vandegrift, it certainly seems cruel."

"Yes. And yet hasn't he been dear about it?" Rose cried. "A girl would be miffed and wouldn't ever slide on our cellar-door any more, but Tommy's the same old trump."

"There he is now, waiting for us!" cried Betty. And truly there he was, waiting to accompany them home as usual.

CHAPTER XXV

BETTY POGANY'S almost lifelong experience which she had compared to wearing her sacque wrong-side-out had given her a certain power of concentration which was to be valuable to her all her life. But even if she had not deliberately fixed her mind upon the solution of the problem of getting over to Millville every Wednesday until the latter part of June, the girl could have thought of little else. Yet, struggle as she would, she could see but two alternatives. She might write a note requesting that Rose and herself be excused on Wednesdays at ten minutes before two for the rest of the year, signing Mrs. Harrow's name and imitating her uneven, slanting hand-writing. Or, they might simply leave school quietly at the end of the last recitation but one at the risk of being detected.

Betty didn't at all like the idea of forging Mrs. Harrow's name, even though in the end Mrs. Harrow would understand and be grateful. Moreover, that plan bristled with difficulties. Mr. Appleton would be likely to express his disapproval to Mr. Meadowcroft and Mr. Meadowcroft might quite likely go to Rose's mother and explain how valuable Latin Composition was—and everything would be spoiled! Furthermore, the alternative, though not really satisfying, was not unpromising. The class in Latin Composition was very large, the recitation room being, according to Tommy, over-crowded because a goodly number of the third-year class had been obliged

to repeat it. As she and Rose hadn't been present at the first lesson, their names wouldn't be on the list. If Miss Cummings should miss them, she might think that there was some reason Rose couldn't take it—she didn't take algebra—and that Betty had so much extra to do helping Rose with the lessons her mother didn't understand about that she wasn't taking it either. But Miss Cummings hated big classes and wouldn't be likely to go poking round to search out additional pupils for the largest class in school. And there was more than an even chance that Mr. Appleton wouldn't find it out. For he was busy with a class himself at the last hour. And the South Paulding pupils who had recitations the last period were not obliged to return to the main room at the close but could go directly to the cloakroom and thence to the three o'clock train.

On the following Wednesday, accordingly, the girls slipped downstairs as their class passed into the recitation room, made their exit by the back door, and reached the station by means of a side street and a bye-path. They accomplished the manœuvre successfully, only Tommy Finnemore being aware of their defection. They visited Dr. Vandegrift, flew over the cross road, found Tommy waiting for them on the turnpike, and reached home within ten minutes of their usual hour.

The next Wednesday they repeated the process, and the future looked bright, indeed. But the third Wednesday, being stormy, presented difficulties.

Missing the appointment was the one thing not to be contemplated. And that was not at all because they had agreed to pay the fee in any case. Dr. Vandegrift had explained to them on their second visit to Parrot

Street why the treatment had to be applied at least once a week—once in seven days. Recalling to their minds the generally accepted theory that the human body is renewed every seven years, he declared that one who has delved deeply into the secret recesses of nature comes to understand that everything moves by sevens, so that there is a partial or miniature renewal every seven days. An organ as delicate as the eye of course exhibits the effect of this law far more sensitively than the grosser ones, but to one who studies, there is a difference even in the structure of the brain or in the hair. Wherefore, the treatment had to be applied at least as often as the renewal in order to maintain equilibrium.

Betty had felt rather stunned after hearing this. The risk of losing an appointment appalled her. Perhaps she had exhibited her distress, for thereupon Dr. Vandegrift took occasion to felicitate them upon the fact that Rose had just passed her fourteenth birthday, the second renewal of her physical powers. She would therefore be far more sensitive and responsive to treatment than she would have been at any other period.

Wet, heavy snow fell all the third Wednesday. Getting to Millville was simple. The problem was to get home in time to escape inquiry. Even had the girls been permitted to walk on a stormy day, the roads were so bad that they couldn't have counted upon getting home until well after dark, which was more than a risk. It was certain punishment—perhaps the forfeiting their privilege of walking on fair days. A second train left Paulding at half-past four which they could wait for. But it was a through train where the other was a local, and it had always been a tradition at the South village

that the school children should never take that train except in an emergency and with special permission. However, so far as Betty could see, there was nothing to do but to return to Paulding and wait in the station for that.

Fortunately, Aunt Sarah would be at sewing-circle and wouldn't know that Betty didn't come by the earlier train. But Mrs. Harrow would have to be warned. She would be likely to go into hysterics if Rose didn't appear on that train. Betty appealed to Tommy.

"Rose and I aren't going home to-night until the late train, Tommy," she said rather anxiously. "We have simply got to wait for that. Will you please tell Rose's mother. - And O, if you could make up some excuse so that Mrs. Harrow won't be asking Rose why and all about it! I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't—well, really like a case of life and death."

"O, I'll do it. I'd like to practise, don't you know. I'll play the spell-binder," Tommy returned with a cheerful grin.

He would have walked in spite of the storm; but he took the train for the first time in order to deliver the message. A truthful lad, scorning prevarication, he glibly, and perhaps not without complacence, informed Mrs. Harrow that some of the high school girls wanted to practise dancing in the gym. after school and Rose had stayed to play for them. Wherefore she and Betty wouldn't be home until the half-past four train came in.

Mrs. Harrow, proud that Rose should be in demand, was unusually cordial. She made Tommy come in and eat a good-sized triangle of cream cake.

He met the girls at the station and lest Rose should

make any embarrassing remarks, explained how he had accounted for their absence.

"O, Tommy! you are so clever. You beat the Dutch!" cried Rose. But Betty was secretly shocked and conscience-smitten. She couldn't speak all the way to Rose's.

Of course, it was all for Rose—for the restoration of her sight—and anything that worked in any small way towards that was not only legitimate but praiseworthy. Tommy hadn't in any way done wrong—real wrong; but if only he hadn't had that air of almost boastful satisfaction! If he had looked sober, chastened, as who should say "I suffer in the cause of righteousness," Betty felt sure that she would not have that distressingly uncomfortable sensation at her heart. But after all, that could hardly have been without fuller knowledge on Tommy's part. And truly he was a loyal soul, breaking his proud precedent without a word and coming home by train to bring the message. And perhaps he had excuse for satisfaction in the manner he had carried out Betty's request. Moreover, he wouldn't tell the whitest lie, the merest fib, to save himself. He had lost hours and hours with his magic which he could have saved by untruthfulness or evasion.

CHAPTER XXVI

AFTER they left Rose and were walking home under his faded umbrella with its streaks of green, Tommy left off his chattering and fell silent. He had felt Betty's involuntary recoil from his falsehood and his heart was heavy. The boy hardly knew how he reckoned upon Betty's good opinion.

"You're awfully good, Tommy, to be so ready to help out," she said gratefully. "I don't know what I should ever do without you to turn to. I have told Rose I sha'n't see her all day Saturday. In the morning I'll help Aunt Sarah and study and practise, but I'm saving the whole afternoon for your magic. Have you got something nice?"

"Bully!" he cried, all cheerfulness again. "There's a peach of a trick where you pour water out of a jug and have it turn out wine. Then pour it back and it's water again. How's that?"

"It sounds first-rate," Betty declared warmly.

"It's a beaut, I can tell you—that is, it ought to be. I haven't tried it yet. It takes a lot of things and some time, so I'm leaving it for Saturday."

"It sounds so attractive that I should think Mr. Meadowcroft might enjoy it. You might do it for him when he gets back," Betty suggested, to Tommy's unbounded delight. But before he could reply, she uttered a startled exclamation.

"What is it?" he asked anxiously. "Do you mean you saw a light?"

"Yes—I guess Aunt Sarah didn't go to the sewing-circle. Like as not they didn't have one," she said in a scared voice. "I'm sure I don't know what she'll say."

"Where's the light now?" Tommy demanded. And truly, the house was dark.

"I saw that light, too, but it was a flash," he said. "It was a lantern going by the further kitchen window and showing through in front. Someone's going cross-lots over to Thorns'—old man Martin probably."

Betty breathed a deep sigh of relief. "You are certainly a wizard, Tommy," she declared.

Tommy's usual boastfulness was not forthcoming. As he stood within the little porch made by the storm door while Betty took off her overshoes, he remarked casually that Mr. Appleton had looked pretty seedy that day.

"O, I didn't notice!" cried Betty contritely. "I am so sorry! Do you mean his cold seems worse?"

"I don't know as it's so much worse, but the poor old duffer seemed so sort of played out and discouraged. Those hollow-chested beggars always seem—well, prone to melancholy, somehow. I wish Mr. Meadowcroft was here to cheer him up."

"Dear me, so do I. And probably he would take some of his classes, too," added Betty.

As she set about replenishing the fire and laying the table for supper, Betty's heart ached dully. Somehow, there seemed so much ahead—so much to be faced. There were other stormy Wednesdays in all likelihood, and other enlistings of Tommy for disagreeable explana-

tions. And there were any amount of unexpected things that might happen. And meanwhile she felt so sorry for Mr. Appleton. It made their stealing away from school seem different, too. It seemed mean to deceive him when he was so wretched. Of course it really didn't hurt him any more now. And it didn't hurt him ever,—not in the least. And when June came, and Rose was like other girls again, and they should tell him what they had done and why, Mr. Appleton would say they had done just right and that he wouldn't for all the world have had them risk Rose's losing the wonderful chance. Why, a much less kind-hearted man, a man that would hardly be called good at all, wouldn't hinder a blind girl from getting back her sight; and Mr. Appleton was almost the kindest soul living. There was no man Betty so respected and looked up to except her father and Mr. Meadowcroft.

But as she thought of Mr. Meadowcroft, again, Betty's heart sank. Immediately after she had echoed Tommy's wish that he were here on Mr. Appleton's account, the girl had realized that she really didn't want him to come just yet. She dreaded his return. He was so keen that he would know almost at once that she had a secret from him—and suppose he didn't understand? He wouldn't have the slightest inkling as Tommy had, and suppose he should be hurt or vexed? It had weighed upon her for some days now that the secret might come between them unfortunately. The girl felt she couldn't possibly endure it for six months to be without his favor. Rather than that, she would have chosen that he remain in Philadelphia.

That, however, was not to be. The following day,

Mr. Appleton was yet more uncomfortable and on Friday he just managed to get through the day. Feeling that only change of air would affect the cold that had obtained such an hold upon him, he left town directly after school to spend the week-end in his home. On Saturday, the superintendent received word that he was seriously ill with pneumonia. The superintendent, who knew Meadowcroft, was more than grateful to remember the experience he had had, and drove over to South Paulding at once to consult him. Learning of his absence, he telegraphed to Philadelphia to ask if he would take charge of the school until Mr. Appleton returned or at least until another substitute could be found.

When the South Paulding children were old enough to go to the high school, they were allowed to attend the Sunday evening service at the church. And whereas many of the boys had to be dragged to morning service, they filled the vestry at night. On the Sunday evening following the receipt of the news of the illness of the principal of the high school, there was suppressed excitement among a certain group of the young people; and at the close word went round among all present, to be borne by them to the absentees, that Mr. Meadowcroft was to have charge of the school, beginning to-morrow morning and remaining until Mr. Appleton returned. Tommy Finnemore talked perhaps more than anyone else. He was quite jubilant and boasted, in his harmless, boyish fashion, of the *cinch* he would have, being an intimate friend of the new teacher's. Practically everyone concerned, after expressing proper regret for the master's illness, was highly delighted with the prospect

of having the charming and elegant Mr. Meadowcroft at the school for at least a fortnight. Only Betty Pogany was a silent dissenter. The girl lay awake far into the night in perplexity and dismay.

Her dismay was due, of course, to her secret. She had dreaded to have Mr. Meadowcroft even return to the village; and to think of him in Mr. Appleton's place was almost more than she could endure. It wasn't that she apprehended that it would be more difficult to get away for her Wednesday visits to Millville; quite likely it would be even simpler. It wasn't that Betty wasn't assured that Mr. Meadowcroft would be even more ready than Mr. Appleton to help Rose. He, too, would be yet more delighted in June. It was only that Mr. Meadowcroft was peculiarly her friend, and she would naturally have longed to do everything within her power to make things easy and pleasant for him. Even though he should never know it until June—and of course he must under no conditions be allowed to know it—though it first came to his ears by means of her glad confession after he had seen Rose as her real self and Rose had first seen him,—still, Betty must needs feel half-guilty all the while, she knew. And O, suppose some of the other high school children should notice her stealing away on one of the Wednesdays before Mr. Appleton returned, and should take it for granted she abused Mr. Meadowcroft's friendship by imposing upon him!

It occurred to Betty that she might tell Mr. Meadowcroft that Mr. Appleton had excused her and Rose on Wednesdays at ten minutes before two. But though the statement would be true except for making the proper noun plural, it would after all amount to a lie, and Betty

didn't feel as if she could possibly make it, though if it came to a question of that or of throwing over Rose's chance, she would have to force herself to do so. Tommy would, no doubt, undertake it, and wouldn't greatly mind, guessing probably the good end for which it was necessary. And yet, Tommy would feel it a very different matter with Mr. Meadowcroft. But anyhow, it was hardly a safe venture. When Mr. Appleton came back at the end of two weeks or so, Mr. Meadowcroft would be sure to mention the fact of their being excused—he was extremely punctilious. And that might be fatal to all Rose's prospects. On the other hand, suppose Mr. Appleton shouldn't—on a sudden, Betty felt herself a monster of wickedness as she caught herself wishing that having gone, Mr. Appleton wouldn't return until June.

The realization was so terrible as to take her from her warm bed and cause her to walk the cold, almost icy floor in her bare feet without being conscious of discomfort. She hadn't meant it, of course she hadn't, at least not just the way it sounded, she said to herself in keen distress. Of course she wouldn't for all the world have his illness last all that time! But a good long rest after a speedy recovery would do Mr. Appleton lots of good. And Mr. Meadowcroft just loved to teach and everybody was crazy to have him. And the best of it was, Mr. Appleton would be getting his salary just the same, because Mr. Meadowcroft was rich and didn't need or want money. Always before, Mr. Appleton had had to pay his substitute. Now, he would even be saving more than he could if he were well, for, old as he was, he had a father and mother and could stay at home with them whenever he wished. And if he stayed until June—or

really next fall, he would save all the money he would pay for board and lodging in Paulding. Self-comforted, the girl crawled back into bed, putting the extra pillow over her cold feet for additional warmth. Her last waking thought was a beatific vision of Mr. Appleton returning in June for commencement, strong and well, clad in new clothes as nice as Mr. Meadowcroft's (purchased out of the salary he had saved), with everybody glad to see him, and Rose Harrow running up to him eagerly and crying out: "O, Mr. Appleton, I can see! I can see you!"

CHAPTER XXVII

TOMMY FINNEMORE'S foolish boasting lost nothing in repetition. When it came with accretions to his father's ear, that gentleman, who shared the general high respect and admiration for Meadowcroft on the part of the village, and who was, moreover, secretly very proud of the latter's friendliness towards his son, threatened Tommy with such dire punishment in case of the slightest misbehavior while Mr. Meadowcroft acted as principal of the school, that the boy told Betty and Rose on the way to school Monday morning that he felt as if he ought to remove his shoes before crossing the floor. George Pogany, too, heard at the store of Tommy's boast, and commenting on it to his daughter declared that he was more than ever glad to know that she was always a good girl in school and would make things as easy for the substitute teacher as she knew how. Mrs. Phillips, who, considering that she had nothing to do with her neighbors, kept up amazingly with local news and gossip, rather gleefully repeated to her brother her own version of the remark as she had received it, which had, even then, little in common with Tommy's idle words.

For a few seconds, Meadowcroft was hurt and a bit indignant. Already deeply attached to the boy as he was, the remark as he heard it sounded more than unfriendly—it seemed almost malicious. But after his sister had left him alone, and he considered the matter

calmly, he recollected the fact that Isabel, who did not in any case care for children, seemed almost to have a grudge against the boy and girl he found so engaging, companionable, and altogether delightful. He knew, moreover, by sad, even bitter experience that she was capable, in the arrogance of her wealth and independence, of quite misconstruing facts or statements of others even when such action served no purpose unless that of affording herself amusement. Tommy might make foolish remarks, and he was quite capable of boasting; but he would never be hateful and upstart as Isabel would have made him believe. Before the end of the evening, Meadowcroft had dismissed the matter from his mind, forgotten it utterly as he believed, though it was to come up again later.

Having prevailed upon Mrs. Appleton to allow him to send a trained nurse of his acquaintance from Philadelphia to care for her husband, and being assured that all was going as well with his friend as could be expected, Humphrey Meadowcroft was able to give himself wholly to the service of the school, and truly it was with immense satisfaction that he did so. And success seemed to be with him from the start. The enthusiastic welcome that he received seemed to endure permanently in the fact of a school extraordinarily amenable and well disposed. The pleasure he gained from his teaching, great as it was, seemed to be exceeded by that which it imparted. In truth, Meadowcroft's polished manners, his beautiful voice, his refined face, his finished scholarliness, the quiet elegance of his dress, his familiarity with a world almost unknown to the quiet country town, exerted a romantic spell over the impressionable boys

and girls who made up the seventy-odd pupils. Even his lameness added to his utter difference from other folk; and very shortly his genuine kindness and sympathetic insight had warmed their romantic admiration into real hero-worship.

For himself, Humphrey Meadowcroft had never been so content. It seemed to him as if he had never known happiness until now. And though the labor involved was not slight in preparing for and teaching from six to eight subjects a day, having at the same time that he held his classes oversight of as many of the pupils as were not having a recitation in another classroom to the one assistant teacher, his zeal and zest rather increased than abated.

This endured for three weeks. But directly after the end of the third week, the clear horizon seemed on a sudden to be clouded over. There was a change. Meadowcroft did not know when, how, or whence the intimation came to him, but he found himself subtly aware that something was wrong. He actually heard or saw nothing to which exception could be taken: everything appeared quiet, orderly, pleasant as before. But somehow he gathered the impression of something amiss, seemed to deduce it from silence and negation. And the impression became more and more strong without being really definite. Finally it seemed like actual suspicion, though there was nothing upon which the acting master could center or base it.

Then quite suddenly and inexplicably, quite appallingly, indeed, it narrowed down and seemed to connect itself with the three pupils he had known well before he came to take Mr. Appleton's place—the three South Paulding

children, two of whom he considered his intimate friends. He had decided at the beginning that he must bear himself towards Betty, Rose, and Tommy just as he bore himself towards the other pupils, to hold his relationship to them to exactly the same plane of formality or informality—that is, with just enough formality to keep the relation of master and pupils dignified and seemly and yet all friendliness. No particular effort had been required, for these three had appeared quite as thoughtful and well-disposed as the others—which was much to say. But now that something seemed to single them out, Meadowcroft suddenly recollected Tommy's boast and decided that he was the culprit. Somehow or other, the boy was misbehaving. He was putting up some game on the substitute master which the other children understood but which he himself had hitherto been too unsuspecting to detect. Betty Pogany wouldn't, he was assured, have anything to do with such plot; she would use her influence against it. But that failing, she wouldn't, of course, tell, and he wouldn't have her. None the less, he determined to catch and punish the malefactor as he deserved.

Which undertaking was not, however, simple. Constant watching and surveillance spoiled Mr. Meadowcroft's fourth week and availed nothing. He saw Betty and Tommy outside of school hours fairly often, though not of course so frequently as he had been accustomed to do when his days were less full. He did not return to South Paulding until the half-past four train, arriving after dark, and when the children came in, their visits were naturally curtailed. In any event, he didn't feel like bringing up this matter at home, still believing

it better to keep the spheres of home and school, neighbors and school-master separate.

And when finally he discovered what was amiss, it was quite by accident. It happened in the midst of his fifth week at the high school—on a Wednesday.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MEANWHILE, Betty and Rose had been making their weekly visit to Millville with no difficulty other than that of securing the fee of three dollars every seven days. With a dollar and five cents to make up regularly (including ten cents for the fare from Paulding to Millville), and a loss of fifteen cents every time bad weather compelled them to use the train to or from school, Betty's savings became exhausted and she had to appeal to Tommy. The boy not only turned in his weekly fares at once, which always amounted to the full ninety cents, but also pressed upon Betty five dollars he had saved since the first of January with this contingency in mind. During all that time, he had purchased no materials for his magic. Such tricks as he hadn't already the requisites for gave way to those he could perform with what he had in store or to those which cost nothing but a certain amount of vigilance and perseverance in seeing that nothing was thrown away by any of his friends that might serve his purpose.

Betty asked frankly for the money and took it in the same spirit. She was touched by Tommy's faithfulness but not distressed. For she knew how very grateful he would be when June came to have had a share in the miracle. Then, too, Tommy's helping with the deficit seemed only a part of the general felicity of the plan as it was now going on. Wednesday after Wednesday she and Rose slipped quietly out of the school building,

and it looked as if they might continue so to do indefinitely. Except for Tommy, Betty didn't think any of their schoolmates realized what they were doing. And even if someone should find out, no one would tell. And Rose Harrow being in it, no one would dream of feeling aggrieved that they should evade the rules in this manner. No one begrudged poor Rose any little gratification she might have. Dr. Vandegrift was very encouraging and kinder on each occasion. He continued to give them his scientific explanations of the progress of the cure, which were of absorbing interest, and which Betty strove to remember to relate to Tommy, who would have gotten so much more out of them than she or Rose was capable of doing.

Rose, indeed, was rather bored. Her enthusiasm flagged. But she enjoyed their weekly flight from school as an escapade and was always eagerly ready for it. That point of view secretly distressed and grieved Betty, but she did not remonstrate with the lively Rose. It was, she believed, all-important that the blind girl should be serene and untroubled in order that the treatment might have the most favorable conditions under which to operate. And if regarding the serious matter as a prank kept up her spirits, Betty certainly wouldn't have a word to say against it. For already Rose declared, when questioned, that her eyes felt better and that the dark-gray obscurity that was her only vision was becoming silver gray.

And yet Betty herself was not wholly happy. She had her moments of thrilling exultation and always she had the consciousness of a great end. But though untroubled in the actual process of breaking away from school each

Wednesday, in the intervals between the ventures she suffered from hours of extreme depression. Imperative necessity though it was, the girl hated the thought of deceiving Mr. Meadowcroft. At such times, her fear returned that her schoolmates would see what she was doing and believe it to be sheer mischief and that she was unfaithful to and unworthy of the friend of whom she had been so proud. Moreover, assured as she was of the essential rightness of her conduct and of his ultimate approval, it began, none the less, to present itself as a barrier between Mr. Meadowcroft and herself. Before Christmas, some of the happiest hours she had known had been spent with him. Now she felt uncomfortable in his presence with a sensation that was almost as poignant as guilt.

Happily, however, he didn't appear to feel any change. He remained at school until four every day to look over to-morrow's lesson, returning home by the half-past four train, and it was only occasionally that Betty saw him. Such spare moments as she had from her practising and from studying with Rose she devoted to Tommy and his magic; for she longed to make up to him so far as she might for being shut out of the secret. But when she met Mr. Meadowcroft at South Paulding by chance, he was so pleased to see her, so charmingly kind, so wholly unaware of any shadow between them that the girl's heart failed her and it would seem as if she couldn't go on. And she tried to avoid chance meetings and to fill her already crowded days with yet more duties.

But the imperative necessity of secrecy, while more painful as it concerned Mr. Meadowcroft, was far more critical as it regarded Rose's parents and Betty's father

and aunt. Suspicion aroused in them might easily prove fatal to their whole wonderful plan. Simply to be compelled to go back and forth to school by the train would ruin everything, and there was always the risk of losing their privilege of walking by arriving home late. On Wednesdays, the girls usually ran a great part of the way to South Paulding in order to be home within five minutes of the usual hour. Wherefore, when, on the fifth Wednesday since Mr. Appleton's illness had taken him from school (he was now convalescing), the girls stole out by the back way towards the station and found the walking very slippery, Betty was almost overcome by dismay. A few days' mild weather had softened the snow and taken much of it away. But since morning the thermometer had dropped suddenly to 20 degrees, and there was a coating of ice over everything.

Rose thought it part of the sport. Clinging rather more closely than usual to Betty, she laughed gaily. Even when they went down together, she enjoyed it. But Betty's brow was troubled: they would be greatly impeded in getting home. She dared not wait for the four-thirty, for to-day there was no sewing circle. Aunt Sarah would be home and would ask why they had not taken the earlier train. And alas! Aunt Sarah was capable of almost anything in the way of thwarting or ruining plans!

After a second tumble, a suggestion flashed through Betty's mind. She decided that they would let Aunt Sarah and Mrs. Harrow believe that they had started to walk and lost the early train before they realized how slippery it was, and had thus been compelled to wait for the later train. A few weeks earlier, Betty would have

been unutterably shocked to contemplate such prevarication or indirection, but to-day she was grateful that such an helpful suggestion should have come to her. The only difficulty was that Mr. Meadowcroft took that train, and would wonder what had kept them so late. He might not ask, but he would naturally expect to be told. Betty didn't feel she could do by him as she planned to do by Aunt Sarah and Mrs. Harrow. She hadn't worried Rose by letting her know how loath she was to use such methods; and now she said only that they would slip into the train after Mr. Meadowcroft boarded it, sit in the back seat, get out first at South Paulding and be out of sight before he alighted. And again Rose felt it was part of the fun.

In the endeavor to do this, however, they nearly lost the train, for Mr. Meadowcroft did not appear. They waited until the last moment, then scrambled on in a manner that would have frightened Mrs. Harrow sadly. And all the way home and afterwards until she saw Tommy, Betty suffered extreme anxiety. Perhaps something had happened to Mr. Meadowcroft. Suppose he had fallen on the ice on the way to the station!

CHAPTER XXIX

AS a matter of fact, Meadowcroft made no attempt to return to South Paulding that night. He hadn't realized the fall in temperature, but glancing out the window once or twice during the last hour, saw one pedestrian and then another fall to the ground and concluded that the first icy walking of the winter was upon them. Slush and mire made hard progress for his crutches, but ice rendered it perilous and practically impossible. He decided to spend the night at the hotel and wrote a note to explain the circumstance to his sister.

He would naturally have sent the note by Tommy, but still feeling that the boy was carrying on some secret mischief, he decided to give it to Betty instead. Realizing that she might not return to the main room after her recitation, he went to the door of the room where the class in Latin Composition was held at this hour. As he appeared on the threshold, the heart of the faithful Tommy grew cold.

"Pardon me, Miss Cummings, for disturbing your class, but may I speak to Miss Pogany?" Meadowcroft asked courteously, running his eye over the crowded room but failing to find the girl who was conspicuous for her lovely face as well as for her height, though she was no longer "Bouncing Bet."

Miss Cummings colored. She stood very much in awe of the elegant gentleman who had taken the place of the plain and rustic Mr. Appleton; and her confusion

was increased by the fact that she couldn't remember Miss Pogany's being in this class at all.

"She isn't here—to-day, Mr. Meadowcroft," she faltered, and Meadowcroft was amazed. In his perplexity, he frowned darkly.

Tommy Finnemore quailed before that frown. Then suddenly light dawned upon him. Nothing was lost upon Tommy, and he, too, had drawn the proper conclusion from glances out the window. Between his eagerness to shield and serve Betty and his disinclination to lie to his friend, with, moreover, a leaven of wholesome fear that the dignity of Mr. Meadowcroft's new rôle imparted, he forgot that he should have raised his hand and asked permission to speak. And his voice, which was in reality all ready to tremble, sounded rather insolent.

"She and Rose made up their minds to go home early, it's so slippery, Mr. Meadowcroft," he said.

Meadowcroft looked at the boy sharply.

"Thank you, Finnemore, but please remember you are not expected to speak out in that manner without permission," he said curtly, and, with an inclination of his head towards Miss Cummings, left the room.

He regretted immediately speaking unkindly to Tommy, and his momentary indignation at Betty's assumption of independence died out. Still he rather wondered at it and was vaguely troubled. Had the girls been forced to walk home, they would, indeed, have needed to start early, but in any event they should have notified him. On the contrary, however, they were expected always to use the train in inclement weather, and they should have attended their class and gone home

with the other children at three o'clock. It was as inconsiderate of Betty to risk the blind girl's limbs on the icy turnpike as it was to leave school in that fashion. It didn't seem like gentle, docile Betty; but Meadowcroft decided that where Rose was concerned the unselfish girl was inclined to be headstrong.

Later, he realized that he should have to speak to Betty of the matter, and still later he was forced to the conclusion that he must do so publicly, as the schoolmaster. She and Rose had broken the rules deliberately. Their whole class knew it, and quite likely, by this time, everyone in the school. If he was faithful to his duty as Mr. Appleton's representative, he must deal with them as he would have dealt with others who offended similarly. But he said to himself that he would speak so kindly that the sting would be removed from the reproof.

He brought up the matter on Thursday morning at the conclusion of the opening exercises. Betty was quite unprepared. Tommy had told her of Meadowcroft's coming into the Latin Composition class, and of the manner in which he had accounted for their absence. She believed, with Tommy, that the excuse had been taken in good part. She had even decided that it would also serve for other slippery Wednesdays, should such occur; and only on such Wednesdays would Mr. Meadowcroft have occasion for coming into the class. But she regretted extremely that Miss Cummings's attention should have been called to their absence.

"There is a matter I wish to bring up before we begin work this morning," Meadowcroft announced in his beautiful voice; and Betty shared the general an-

ticipation of a pleasant conclusion. "It is the matter of leaving the school grounds without permission before school is dismissed. As I understand it, the rule is that you are not to be excused from a class without a written order from parent or guardian, nor at any other time without permission from your teacher. Is it possible, Miss Pogany, that you and Miss Harrow do not understand this?"

In all her life, Betty Pogany had never been spoken to, in the way of reproof, at school; and though this was due in part to the fact that she had been Bouncing Bet so long, it was also due to good intention. And this, coming from her particular friend in the person of school-master, was the more appalling. It seemed to the girl as if the school-room were revolving round her in a cloud of blackness. She couldn't speak, and forgetting his intention to be very gentle, Mr. Meadowcroft repeated the question sternly.

"Yes, sir," she gasped faintly. "I mean—no, sir. I mean, I did—I understood. Mr. Appleton told me."

"What! do you mean you deliberately broke the rule yesterday when you went home at ten minutes before two?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir," the girl owned, looking so white and wretched that his momentary warmth became pity. It was unfair and unkind of him to turn her maternal concern for Rose into wilful wrong-doing. He only wished that about seventy of his audience were absent.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have said deliberate. It's an ugly word," he said very kindly. "I daresay it was only thoughtlessness and I feel sure it won't happen again. I shall have to ask you both to learn the first paragraph

of the first book of Cæsar and recite it to me at the close of school to-morrow, and that will be the end of it."

That night Meadowcroft felt sure that Betty would drop in upon him at Mrs. Phillips's to say what she couldn't say before the whole school. He was greatly disappointed when the evening passed without bringing her, but felt that something at home had kept her. Sufficient snow fell to make the walking safe and not too much to make it uncomfortable, so the girls weren't on the train next morning. But though Betty arrived at school in good time, she didn't, as he had expected, come to him. Recess and the longer intermission at noon passed without effort towards explanation on the part of the girl. At the close of the session she and Rose presented themselves at his desk to recite the passage of Latin prose.

Rose was as gay and glib as ever as she rattled off the words like doggerel. But Betty was so white and sober that one might have believed the account of the division of Gaul was a tragedy. Meadowcroft was filled with compunction. He must have hurt her sadly, he decided, and was ready to be all kindness and perhaps even apologetic the moment she should give him an opening by vouchsafing a bare word of explanation.

But the bare word was not forthcoming. For a week thereafter he saw the girl only in the school-room. Presently it came to him that Betty was avoiding him and he was forced to conclude that she was sulky because of the reproof he had felt compelled to administer—deserved reproof. He was surprised, for he would as soon have expected Tommy to sulk as this girl whose

transparent frankness he had always admired. It was almost inconceivable.

Tommy Finnemore, though he might be plotting secret mischief, was the same odd, lovable, frank comrade as always. As a matter of fact, however, Tommy was sailing before the wind. On the Wednesday following that upon which the girls had been detected, the boy was amazed to see Betty and Rose leave the building again instead of going into class. It was a venturesome act, truly, and Tommy realized that the necessity must be imperative, indeed. They were facing real peril, and Tommy was too loyal to Betty to allow them to face it alone. He couldn't serve them further by remaining. And though he couldn't share their secret, he would in any event share their peril. Accordingly, he, too, left school instead of going into recitation with his class.

Miss Cummings didn't miss him, but she noticed to-day that the girls weren't in class. She decided that they were not taking the course this year and that Mr. Meadowcroft now understood the fact. Their names weren't down and she didn't take the names of the class for permanent record until after the first test which came in another week and which would be likely to weed out a goodly number of students and reduce the class to more suitable size. As for Meadowcroft, the last thing he would have expected was a repetition of a twice-forbidden act, and he took it for granted the girls were where they belonged during school hours thenceforward. The greater his amazement, therefore, when two weeks after the first occurrence, he discovered by chance that the girls had run away again.

CHAPTER XXX

ON the first Wednesday that Tommy Finnemore abandoned Latin Composition he made his way to the book-store, passed the time agreeably in looking over the small stock of books on magic, and walked home with the girls as usual. On the second Wednesday, he went to the railway station and watched the engines switching. Then just before he decided to leave there to avoid the South Paulding crowd and stroll along the turnpike until the girls should overtake him, he recollected an errand his father had bidden him do at one of the shops. Fearful of losing time, he ran from the platform all the way to the main street.

Forgetting the need of caution, he struck into a lane that could be seen from the school-house windows. Unhappily he wore a conspicuous red knitted wool cap. One ear had been nipped by the frost a week earlier and he had worn the cap since. And when Meadowcroft, glancing out the window five minutes before the close of school, caught sight of a tuft of scarlet at the top of a long, awkward figure loping along like a kangaroo, he couldn't do otherwise than recognize him. He was taking his turn at breaking rules, it would appear.

To avoid any chance of error, he went into the classroom to make sure Tommy wasn't there. He discovered more—or less—than he had expected. For not only was Tommy a truant, but neither Rose nor Betty, who had left the main room with the others forty minutes

earlier, was anywhere to be seen. As he returned to his desk to dismiss the school, it seemed to the man as if an avalanche had fallen.

It was certainly like an avalanche next day to the three concerned when they were called to an accounting—almost like an avalanche falling upon those who are unaware of the existence in nature of such forces. They had had no inkling of the fact that their absence had been detected. Even if any of the South Paulding children had realized the significance of Mr. Meadowcroft's standing at the door of the recitation room for less than half a minute, the three companions had no chance to be warned by them. The walking was not good, and as they ran the greater part of the way home, they were all thoroughly tired. Even Tommy did not leave the house that night.

Meadowcroft spent the night at the hotel in Paulding, having remained at school deep in thought until after the last train had gone. He had learned from Miss Cummings that the girls hadn't been in the Latin Composition class for a number of weeks and that Tommy had been absent twice. He tried to look at the matter dispassionately—tried to consider it as a manifestation of the high spirits of healthy children in winter weather. But he couldn't see it in that light. Neither Tommy nor Betty was irresponsible. Both stood to him in a relationship different from that between himself and the rest of the school; and he couldn't but feel that such conduct amounted to a sort of conspiracy against him, a deliberate attempt upon the part of those two (for he didn't count Rose) to discredit his incumbency of the position of school-master, to make it a sorry failure.

It was a stiff indictment, he acknowledged, to make against those of their tender years; but he was ready and eager to be set right. They should have ample opportunity to clear their skirts.

Again, on another Thursday morning, he held back the classes after the opening exercises. But on this occasion he rather icily requested Miss Pogany and Finnemore to take seats on a bench directly in front of the desk. The meaning was plain, but the fact itself was so startling that he had to repeat the order before it was obeyed.

It was truly an awful journey thither. Betty could scarcely drag herself across the room and Tommy's knees trembled so that he expected to hear the windows rattle. But Rose Harrow sprang to her feet unabashed and followed blithely after. She hadn't been summoned, but she didn't mean to be left out. And Meadowcroft, who didn't fancy her taking it upon herself thus indirectly to criticize him, was ready to order her back, when a little uncertain groping about for the bench on her part reminded him of her blindness and dissipated his indignation. Towards the real culprits, however, his wrath held.

"Am I right in thinking you were all three absent from your class in Latin Composition yesterday?" he asked. Apparently, it wasn't at all with the purpose of shielding them he had ordered them to the pillory; for he spoke so distinctly and impressively that even if it hadn't been so appallingly quiet throughout the big room, his voice would have reached the furthestmost corners.

Rose's voice was the only clear one in the general affirmation.

"And the same the week before?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you two girls have missed more lessons than that?"

Something in Betty's face seemed to apprise him of the shocking truth.

"You haven't attended that class once since I came here in January to take Mr. Appleton's place during his critical illness, in short?" he asked cuttingly.

Had Betty been responsible for Mr. Appleton's illness or even for his death, she could scarcely have looked more appalled—more guilty.

"No, Mr. Meadowcroft," she gasped. With all her heart the girl longed to tell him that her action had nothing to do with him, that she had done the same thing before Mr. Appleton left; but she couldn't have framed the sentence even if her promise to Dr. Vandegrift didn't forbid her to make any admission or confession that wasn't forced from her.

"It is certainly time to call a halt," he remarked. "But first will one of you three kindly explain this unusual conduct on the part of pupils at school?"

The long silence, he had himself to break.

"Well, Miss Pogany, what have you to say?" he asked, his voice less stern, more patient.

Alas! what was there she could say! "Nothing," she returned desperately.

"Miss Harrow?"

"Nothing, Mr. Meadowcroft," Rose rejoined promptly and rather pertly.

"Finnemore?"

"No, sir," said Tommy weakly.

Mr. Meadowcroft stared at them incredulously. Still he wouldn't give up hope.

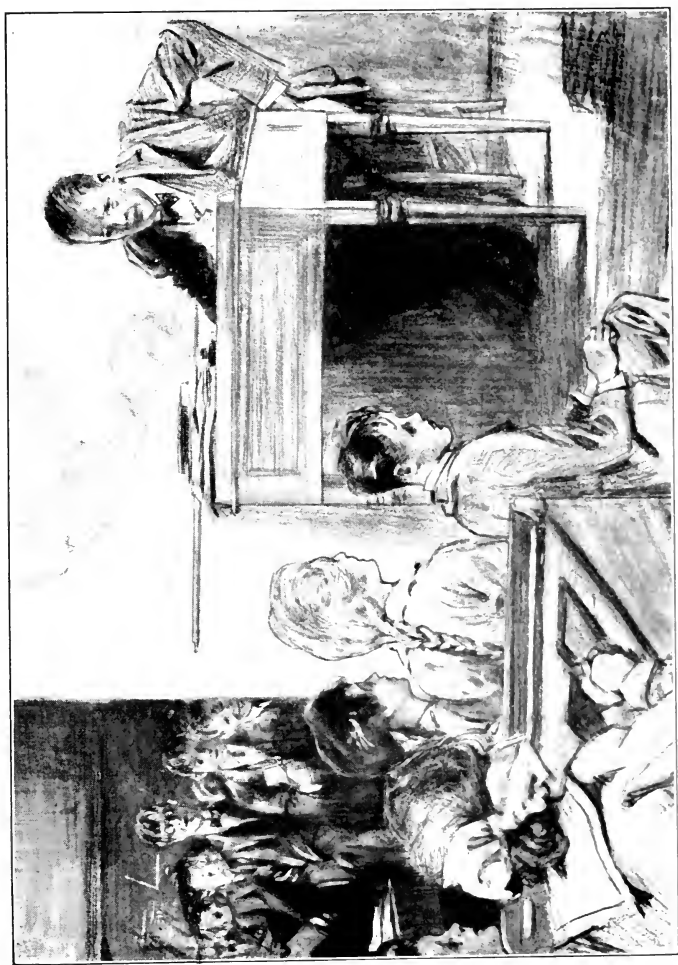
"Perhaps one of you has a word of regret for the past or of assurance for the future?" he asked in a lower tone.

With all her heart Betty regretted that it had been necessary—imperative for them thus to steal away from school; yet she didn't, she couldn't regret that they had done so—only that they had been caught. That she might have cause to regret to the very last day of her life. There was nothing, therefore, to say, and she sat white and rigid with downcast eyes. As for Tommy, for the nonce he seemed conscious only of a desire for the support and shelter of his own seat in the back of the room. He didn't know what to do with his hands. He dared not drop them lest they indicate how absurdly his knees were shaking; but holding them as he did made him feel like a kangaroo. But even if he had felt like himself he couldn't express any regrets or assurances while Betty was dumb.

Meadowcroft continued to look from one to another. He hadn't expected anything like this. It seemed incredible that any one of the three should be so hardened as to feel no compunction, to be unwilling to express even perfunctory regret. And to have them all dumb! He didn't know how to proceed.

"Am I to conclude that it has been a wilful disregard of rules—a sort of brazen disobedience, as I can't help terming it?" he demanded with a hint of bitterness, for he was terribly hurt.

No one denied even that extreme statement. Suddenly Meadowcroft turned rather fiercely to Tommy.



“Am I to conclude that it has been a wilful disregard of rules?”

PROPERTY
OF THE
BIBLIOTHEQUE
NATIONALE

"Finnemore, what did you mean when you told me a fortnight since that Miss Pogany and Miss Harrow had remained away from class because it was slippery and they wished to start home early?" he demanded sharply. "Was that the truth?"

Tommy had his tongue between his teeth to keep them from chattering. By all the signs, he seemed in the throes of an ague, but the other fellows wouldn't understand that and would think he was scared. Unable to speak, he shook his head jauntily.

"Did Miss Pogany tell you to make that excuse?"

"O no, sir, she didn't know anything about it," the boy cried emphatically.

"Then why did you say such a thing?" Meadowcroft demanded very sternly.

Afterwards, Tommy could scarcely believe it. And at the time it didn't seem to be himself that was speaking. Even as he pronounced the words he seemed to be hearing someone else repeat them.

"It was a fish story, sir," he said, grinning in sickly fashion, "a—er—*Finnyfish* story, don't you know."

"Tommy," said Mr. Meadowcroft quietly, then corrected himself.

"Finnemore, you may get your books and go home and remain until Monday. At that time I will talk to you further."

It seemed hours to Betty that she sat before that stern, pale judge while Tommy stalked to his seat, pulled the books from his desk, dropping one and another and still a third upon the floor, and finally stalked across the room and out slamming the door behind him. Still nothing happened. Was she to sit all day in that terrible

place? And O, what of Rose? What of their visits to Dr. Vandegrift?

Meadowcroft struck the bell for the first classes, and one of them passed into the recitation room. Then he turned to the girls.

"You can go to your seats and to your classes now. I will talk to you, also, further on Monday," he said rather wearily.

CHAPTER XXX

THAT night when Meadowcroft alighted from the train at South Paulding, he found Tommy waiting.

"I didn't mean to be so fresh this morning, honest and true," the boy burst forth breathlessly. "I'm just no end cut up about it, Mr. Meadowcroft. I don't see—gee! I wish you had given me one good licking."

"That's all right, Tommy," Meadowcroft assured him warmly. "I realized afterwards it was nothing but bluster. We are too good friends to let anything come between us now." And he rested on one crutch so that they could shake hands.

"I wish you'd flung a book at my head," Tommy exclaimed as they went on up into the avenue.

"Your slamming the door made sufficient commotion," Meadowcroft remarked with a smile. "And then, too, don't forget you've got something more coming to you Monday."

Tommy grinned. Meadowcroft waited a little, hoping the boy would have something to say of the real matter at issue. Tommy's reticence confirmed his recent conclusion that he wasn't the culprit he had believed him. His participation in the mischief had been, like the falsehood he had told, solely for the sake of shielding Betty Pogany, who had apparently suddenly been seized with an impulse to be as naughty as she could be to see what it was like. So instead of blaming Tommy, Meadowcroft felt like showing his appreciation of his loyalty. And

as the surest way to Tommy's heart was through magic, he asked the boy if he had succeeded in getting the red, white, and blue layers in a jar of water.

"Not yet," said Tommy, "nor soon either, for that matter."

"What do you mean?" Meadowcroft demanded.

"No magic for yours truly till school's out in June," Tommy returned, grinning.

"Tommy Finnemore, what do you mean?" cried Meadowcroft. Had he sent the boy home to set the house afire or do something equally destructive with his magic?

"Dad was fierce when he heard I'd been sassing you, so he handed me out that sentence," returned the boy coolly.

"How did he hear? Who told him?"

"I did. He wanted to know why I was home at that time o' day and I said I was sent home for talking back."

Which proved that Tommy wouldn't lie to serve himself. Meadowcroft's heart sank. He wished he had done anything rather than bring that punishment upon the boy. It began to look as if it had been a mistake—a huge error for him to take the school. He had brought this upon one of his friends and had apparently alienated the other. And yet, had he wished to refuse to help out Mr. Appleton he could hardly have done so. And having gone so far, he couldn't retreat now.

"I am right sorry about that, Tommy. I wish with all my heart I could do something about it," he said earnestly.

"You needn't be sorry. It was just right. For once

in his life dad did the correct thing," the boy declared staunchly.

Reaching the house, Meadowcroft asked Tommy to come in, but Tommy was due at home. Meadowcroft hesitated.

"Shall you see Betty?" he asked. And Tommy said that he should.

"You might say to her that I shall be right here to-night and to-morrow after school and all day Saturday and Sunday," he said. "If she should feel like talking things over, it might be easier and simpler here."

Tommy delivered the message immediately. Betty heard it indifferently. Indeed, it failed to penetrate her wretchedness sufficiently to make any impression. Terrible as the experience of that morning had been, it already seemed to the girl far, far in the past. Her one thought was of Rose and of the weekly visits to Dr. Vandegrift. If the latter were over, if Rose was condemned to perpetual blindness, what did anything matter?

All day, the girl's heart had been like a stone. Never in her life had she known such wretchedness. She had proposed to Rose that they should take the train home. It wasn't that she wouldn't have preferred to walk, but that she knew she couldn't possibly keep up her courage with Rose for so long a period. Rose apparently hadn't suffered greatly yet; but that was because she hadn't yet realized the import of it all. Betty, convinced against her will that all was lost, wouldn't, nevertheless, give up yet. But she wanted to have forced some hope out of the situation before she should see Rose again.

Finally, it came to her that they could get Dr. Vande-

grift to see them on Wednesday at three o'clock or a quarter of an hour before. His time was all taken, she knew, but he might be able to manage it by changing another patient. Then they could go directly after school. That would make them very late in getting home and it would be very difficult to arrange with Aunt Sarah and Mrs. Harrow. Tommy could probably contrive something to satisfy the latter; but Aunt Sarah seemed hopeless. And yet, Betty couldn't let her block Rose's cure—couldn't let her ruin Rose's whole future. Over Sunday Betty debated appealing to her father. On Monday morning she decided to go to him that night and ask his permission to come home late for one night a week, explaining that Rose wished it very much. By the time she reached school, the girl was full of hope.

But hope was suddenly and finally quenched very shortly after the opening of school. Again, the three offenders were summoned to the bench before the desk that was like the prisoner's cage—a refinement of cruelty which even Tommy admitted to be “piling it on.” But for Betty the walking the length of the room with everyone staring at her and sitting in that conspicuous place was so terrible that it acted rather as an anæsthetic rendering her less sensitive to the trial and verdict. Perhaps, however, it would be nearer fact to liken it to suffering with a severe tooth-ache the while a broken arm is being set. For certainly her sensibility wasn't deadened.

Meadowcroft's manner was different to-day. He was quiet, seemed rather sad than indignant, and his voice was weary—almost discouraged. He asked whether anyone had any explanation to offer or any extenuat-

ing circumstances to submit. But nothing was forthcoming.

"I confess that I hardly know how to deal with such flagrant insubordination," he admitted, "nor understand how young people can be so unmoved after sufficient time to meditate upon deliberate wrong-doing. It makes me regret for the first time that another than I did not take Mr. Appleton's place during his absence, one who would have been more skilful to handle such an affair—or better yet, one whom pupils would have liked and respected too well to defy in such fashion."

Rose caught her breath quickly as if in protest. Tommy flushed so deeply that his freckles were swallowed up, and Betty, whose face couldn't have been whiter, unconsciously wrung her hands.

"Of course all that is beside the point," Meadowcroft was going on. "Here I am in the master's chair, with the duty before me of dealing with the case as best I can. I can't help doubting whether the two of you who offended a second time, who having been held up for breaking a rule and warned deliberately, broke it again—I rather doubt whether such rebels against duly-constituted authority belong in the school or ought to be allowed to remain longer in this law-abiding body."

The silence was appalling. Glancing at Betty, Tommy wished with all his heart, he had followed her sooner so that he could share the worst with her. Meadowcroft glanced at the girl, too, and made a final appeal.

"Perhaps, Miss Pogany, even though you acted deliberately, you wouldn't do it again? Perhaps you regret it now?" he asked very kindly.

Betty looked at him almost wildly. If only he knew!

And she strove to cling to the remembrance that he didn't know, lest she begin to hate him. He thought the look defiant.

"Then I am to infer that you acted deliberately and that you have no regrets?" he concluded. And her silence gave consent.

Tommy raised his hand. Meadowcroft noticed the stains on it and even at the moment realized that when they had worn off there would be no others for many weary weeks.

"Yes, Finnemore?" he said kindly.

"It was just the same for me, Mr. Meadowcroft, as for the girls," Tommy said quietly. "I heard what you said the first time and of course I understood."

"I daresay. Well, then none of you would seem to belong to the school whose discipline you have flouted. However, in the absence of the regular master, I am not going to put you out. I shall see to it, nevertheless, that so long as we all remain, you shall break no further rules. Also, penitent or impenitent, you shall do what is possible towards making up what you have lost. There are three weeks before the Easter holidays. During that period you are not to leave the school-grounds after you arrive in the morning until you go to the station at night. And beginning to-day the three of you are to remain after school every day until quarter-past four o'clock. The extra time is to be devoted solely to Latin Composition with a daily recitation beginning at half-past three. I shall do my best to prepare you to take the examination with the others on the last day of the term. Prepare the first lesson in the book for to-day, please."

Tommy, who couldn't help admiring the neatness of

this arrangement even as he groaned within himself, raised his hand.

"That will make sixteen or seventeen lessons for us, and the rest of the class only gets about twelve in all, and Miss Cummings has a roomful to teach and you'll only have us three," he remarked ingenuously.

"A little extra drill won't do any harm," remarked Meadowcroft dryly. "I am hoping, indeed, to make the course thorough. That will do. You may go to your seats."

CHAPTER XXXI

AS she turned, Betty glanced fearfully at Rose. But even now poor Rose didn't understand. As she made her way to her seat, she carried herself nonchalantly, putting out her tongue and grimacing when she was in such position as not to be seen from the master's desk. It must come to her, however, and the thought of perpetual blindness might be her death-blow.

For now, absolutely the last ray of hope was blotted out. They were to be kept at school until quarter-past four every day, and Dr. Vandegrift left Millville ten minutes earlier on Wednesday. Everything had been wasted! All the doctor's kindness and skill had been thrown away, and Rose was far worse off than if they had never begun the treatment. She would never get over the terrible disappointment of knowing that she might have been cured.

As for herself, Betty felt that it would kill her. She would have gone down on her knees to beg Dr. Vandegrift to allow her to say one word of explanation to Mr. Meadowcroft, but she knew that to be hopeless. He wouldn't let her mention the matter. No, all hope was gone. She went about all day as if stunned. At the noon intermission, she couldn't touch her luncheon. But after Rose had eaten hers with the wonted relish and a choice piece of chocolate cake from Betty's basket, the latter went over with her the lesson assigned for reciting

after school that afternoon. With that and an hour before the recitation, during which the girls were allowed to study together, they were well prepared with the lesson.

As Tommy remarked afterwards, however, it didn't look as if it were going to be a cinch. As a matter of fact, lack of experience made Meadowcroft more critical and exacting always as a teacher than Mr. Appleton; and when he made special effort to be thorough and to take nothing for granted, as he did in this instance, he was truly to be feared. Those fifteen lessons proved something never to be forgotten.

"Wasn't it fierce!" cried Rose as they sank into their seats in the half-past four train. "Isn't that man the limit when he's really mad? Goodness me, do you suppose it will be as bad as this every day, Betty?"

"It will be worse," said Betty despairingly. "It will be—— O, Rose, here he comes! Just think, we shall have to go home on the same train with him every night. I wish we hadn't sat here. After this, we'll take a seat where there aren't any empty ones near."

Meadowcroft greeted them politely as he swung himself into the seat opposite. Tommy joined him and the two talked pleasantly all the way; but of course Tommy didn't know what Mr. Meadowcroft was doing. The girls were silent until the moment they stood at Rose's door.

"Rose, darling, don't—don't feel too badly," Betty entreated chokingly. "Don't give up yet. There may be some way out even now."

"O, Betty, I don't mind," rejoined Rose coolly. "In some ways it's rather a lark. But poor mama! it'll be

hard on her getting up that Latin comp. every night on top of the rest."

"She won't need to. After this we'll do it on the train coming home—we'll have to ride every night—and with the hour after school and a little while at noon we can get it all right. But I'll come over after supper to-night to look it over."

In reality Betty wanted an excuse to relieve her anxiety by seeing Rose again that night. She looked for a terrible change, but Rose seemed as serene and gay as ever. Betty couldn't understand. Was Rose concealing her grief—her agony? Or didn't she realize the truth, even now? Or perhaps she relied upon Betty to find a way out?

Betty herself said she would not give up until Wednesday had come and gone. The next day was wretched, but Rose was still cheerful, or appeared to be. And then Wednesday morning came.

What would the day bring forth? From the moment school opened, Betty looked for something to happen. The pipes might burst and the building become so cold that school would have to be dismissed for the day. Something like that had once happened in the grammar school. Or Mr. Meadowcroft might be called away at noon—on business. With all the bitterness in her heart against him, Betty couldn't have faced the idea of his illness closing the school. Or a very small fire might be discovered, which could easily be put out but not without flooding the school-room and making it impossible to remain there for the rest of the day. The distressed girl was almost tempted to start a blaze herself, but she hardly dared attempt anything so hazardous.

Noon approached, and nothing happened. Suppose nothing was to happen? What would they do? Couldn't they somehow break out? If missing the visit would be of such terrible moment to Rose, were they not justified in securing it at any cost? Why shouldn't they simply leave school at intermission? The worst of it was, that it would only serve for once. Disaster would follow immediately. They would be expelled from school and be prisoners at home, and that visit would be their last.

For the first time since she had been in the high school, Betty failed wretchedly in all her lessons that morning. In Greek, which came just before intermission, her recitation was so poor that Meadowcroft was amazed and finally indignant. For she not only failed in the lesson for the day; she refused to answer questions which she knew perfectly and muddled the simplest constructions until he was forced to conclude that she was striving to be disagreeable. He kept his patience, but wondered sadly what had come over the girl.

The class ended, intermission began. Nothing had happened! The school-room was comfortable; there was no trace of smoke, and Meadowcroft was as firmly entrenched as ever. Betty couldn't eat her lunch, and was too disturbed to go over the lesson with Rose. Begging Tommy to take her place, she fled to the gymnasium and took refuge in a dark corner.

Five minutes before the close of intermission, Meadowcroft looked up with surprise to see her coming towards him. She was very white and he saw a look of desperation in her soft dark eyes before her lashes hid them as she stood at his desk. His heart leaped. Betty had

come to "make up." It was hard for her, terribly hard, but she was going to explain—to own herself in the wrong.

Poor child! She wouldn't have to go far. She needn't go half-way. The instant she started, he would be there to meet her!

CHAPTER XXXII

“**M**R. MEADOWCROFT, will you please excuse Rose and me at ten minutes before two?” the girl asked in a low, strained voice. Her desperation made of the request a veritable demand.

Meadowcroft looked at her in amazement. Was the girl out of her head?

“Betty Pogany, what do you mean? What has come over you, pray?” he asked.

She raised her eyes with an effort. To him they flashed defiance, though in reality their expression meant desperate entreaty; as she repeated the request her voice showed the effort it cost her to speak at all.

“For what? Is either of you ill?” he asked.

She shook her head impatiently,—an action that did not help her.

“Have you a written request from someone in authority?” he asked less kindly.

Of course he knew that she hadn’t! She couldn’t speak. She only stared at him with that odd, alien expression in her soft, dark eyes.

“See here, Betty, just tell me why you want to go,” he proposed kindly. “Tell me just enough so that I can decide whether it would seem to another extremely important. If so, if it seem merely important instead of extremely so, I will excuse you, even though it would mean losing the extra recitation after school. You ought to know, my child, that young folk often get distorted

views of things. You are hardly old enough to assume the self-assured manner you have exhibited of late. Perhaps a mistaken sense of values misleads you. Come, now, let us forget for the moment everything that has happened since Mr. Appleton went away, and you tell me why you make what seems to me like a strange demand?"

He smiled kindly, but his very kindness seemed malicious.

"I can't," she said sharply, and the bell rang for the close of intermission.

"Very well, then, that's all there is to it," he said dryly.

Betty looked wildly towards Rose with an impulse to seize her arm and run with her from the building. But in a quieter moment, she had already seen the folly of such procedure, and she returned to her seat. The minutes dragged, each being a stretch of agony, and yet all too soon came the hour at which for nine weeks she and Rose had left to take the train for Millville. It seemed as if she could not sit still, as if she must snatch Rose away and run to the station. She looked wildly at Mr. Meadowcroft in the mad hope that he would bid her go if she liked. But the class filed into the recitation room leaving the three culprits flanked by rows of empty seats. There was no class reciting in the room at that hour and the silence was intense. Ten minutes passed and Betty heard the train whistle. That was really the end of everything. It seemed to the girl that her heart was broken.

After a little she glanced fearfully at Rose. Rose looked unusually sober and Betty averted her eyes

quickly, lest she break down utterly. Rose was beginning to comprehend. She had trusted to Betty to find some way out of the difficulty and had kept up her spirits wonderfully. But she, too, had heard the whistle and knew it meant her doom. It was like a tolling bell.

She looked wildly at Mr. Meadowcroft, who was jotting down figures in the big record book. And suddenly the girl knew that she hated him. Betty Pogany, who had never in all her life hated anyone, who was gentle and charitable and affectionate even towards her Aunt Sarah, who was acknowledged by everyone to be uncommonly disagreeable,—Betty Pogany felt that she hated this man as she would have hated those terrible people in the French Revolution who sent Marie Antoinette upon that awful way to the guillotine.

CHAPTER XXXIII

BY the time school was dismissed and the extra class called upon to recite, Betty's feelings were so wrought up that she felt like throwing her books on the floor and screaming. She couldn't bear to look at Rose. She couldn't endure thinking what their presence here—their absence from Dr. Vandegrift's office—signified. And yet she could think of nothing else.

She wasn't prepared with the lesson. After she had failed twice, Meadowcroft asked if she hadn't studied it.

"A little," she said.

"A little—what does that mean?"

"On the train last night," she said. She didn't explain that even that little preparation had been perfunctory. For in her heart she had believed that she wouldn't be present at the recitation. She would be at Millville or on the way back.

Meadowcroft looked at her despairingly.

"And you have had nearly two hours just now," he declared. "You have had nothing since ten minutes before two. Do you mean to tell me you wasted all that time?"

Chatter about wasting time meant little to Betty's broken heart.

"I wasn't studying," she replied with quiet dignity.

Even Tommy was surprised that Meadowcroft, with no inkling of understanding, kept his patience in the face of what must have looked like extreme stubbornness.

He merely warned her that it mustn't happen again. Thereafter he would expect her to be prepared without exception for every lesson. And he would hear her recite this at noon to-morrow.

That night as Meadowcroft sat alone, depressed and disheartened, his sister came flying in with something to communicate which her manner announced to be startling and amusing. He didn't care to see her at that moment. He felt too sore to strive to detect anything amusing in what she should offer. He was so grieved and discouraged with regard to Betty Pogany that he wished to be left alone, even though he had given up getting any light upon the matter. And yet, it seemed wrong to give up. Quite apart from his particular affection for Betty, Humphrey Meadowcroft felt that he must have been shocked and pained to see such a change in any young girl as had come over her. It was appalling to see any girl growing more unruly and stubborn from day to day and to be powerless to arrest the process.

Perhaps he wouldn't have felt so much at sea if Betty had been a boy. In that case, however, the situation wouldn't be the same. Tommy Finnemore, less guilty,—not guilty at all, perchance,—took his punishment blithely and was his own genial, happy, whimsical self the while; but the girl resented receiving less than her desert and haughtily demanded to be left free to choose her own course of action. What could lie at the bottom of it? If only he could get some inkling!

Isabel Phillips appearing at that instant, her brother held the question in abeyance there. But the expression on his face indicated the same thing as if she had come upon him reading, and he had closed the book with his

thumb marking the place so that he could open it the moment he should be free.

"Humphrey, what do you think they have got around about Bouncing Bet?" she asked facetiously.

He started. He didn't like to hear his sister's gossip in regard to the school children; and he disliked to hear her speak thus of Betty, who wasn't now, to say truth, any more *bouncing* than Isabel herself. Yet he looked at her in sharp inquiry. He almost wondered if he had thought aloud and she had heard his exclamation.

"They say that she has been running away from school once a week all winter to visit a beauty specialist for treatment to reduce her flesh!" she declared eagerly.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. But he winced secretly.

"No nonsense about it," she retorted. "It's plain fact."

"But the girl doesn't need it, Isabel," he protested.

"Certainly not now. But she thought she did at the start. She has lost pounds and pounds and pounds. I got a good look at her myself to-day and I was struck dumb, honestly, Humphrey. She had the courage of her convictions, and yet—the silly little gump really looks shockingly now and I should think Pa Pogany would come down upon her. I wonder you haven't noticed how white and thin she is!"

He had, indeed, noticed it. And he was shocked to recollect that he had noticed more than once that she hadn't eaten her luncheon. Isabel's story truly carried conviction. Greatly distressed, Meadowcroft puzzled over the matter far into the night. He hated terribly to credit such an explanation of Betty's strange conduct, but it accounted for the girl's behavior as nothing else

could. To him, it seemed worse than silly. It seemed monstrous to his mind. And selfish—to think that she should have dragged Tommy and the innocent Rose into the net! He never would have believed it of Betty! And yet, every circumstance, every detail fitted into that theory and he was forced to accept it as fact.

As Betty had cried herself to sleep after hours of agony the night before, she looked worse than ever when Meadowcroft saw her at school Thursday morning. Mistaken, naughty, vain, headstrong as the girl was, his heart went out to her. He was terribly sorry for her, and he began to be less shocked. After suffering all her life because of her size, she had suddenly taken things into her own hands and resolved upon a change. He had himself given her the idea; and after all, she was only thirteen. She had felt that she had a right to secure what she felt to be a boon at almost any cost. Doubtless she had had to maintain absolute secrecy because of her Aunt Sarah; and in any event he could scarcely have expected her to confide in him in this instance. She would realize that he wouldn't have countenanced any such thing. She had accepted his efforts to preserve order in the school as persecution, and her stubbornness doubtless seemed to herself righteous indignation.

He longed to speak some word of comfort to the child, but he had no opportunity. He longed also to protest against her mad course of action, but he didn't feel that he could, for he had no definite information. But he wondered why someone else didn't speak to her, didn't warn her that she was going too far. What did the girl want, anyhow? Did she wish to become a skeleton?

A week passed. Meadowcroft saw that Betty con-

tinued the process of starvation. She scarcely tasted her luncheon. But she ceased to struggle. Apparently resigned to the inevitable, she kept up with her lessons and helped Rose as ever with hers. On the Wednesday, the day of her weekly visit to the mysterious beauty specialist, she was noticeably restless—poor, silly child, she was, indeed, almost tragically so. And on the second Thursday she looked really ill. Meadowcroft was extremely concerned, but he hardly knew how to approach her. She was uniformly and frigidly polite towards him, but manifestly she wished to have nothing to say to him beyond what was absolutely necessary.

He began to feel more kindly towards Rose than he had ever done. Though he had been moved to admiration by her dramatic appeal to Betty's father in the late summer, he had forgotten it in the course of the year, and had unconsciously cherished almost a grudge against the girl because she had so monopolized Betty and had seemed to take her devotion for granted. Now he felt that Rose had redeemed herself rather handsomely. He understood the girl sufficiently to be aware that the audacity of the course Betty had taken would appeal strongly to her; but she had gone on sharing the peril when it had gone beyond mere risk; she had shared the blame and the punishment without a word. She was, in a word, as loyal as Tommy himself to their erring friend.

The days passed rather drearily. The last Wednesday of the term, which found Meadowcroft seriously depressed, found Betty Pogany utterly forlorn. Again, as on the preceding days when the train had gone to Millville without them, wild thoughts of flight came to the

girl, only to be wearily dismissed. It was too late now, anyhow. Having missed two weeks, the third meant nothing—nor the twenty-third. Everything was lost! There was nothing to do but to wait for the first Wednesday in the Easter vacation, go to Dr. Vandegrift to explain the situation and pay him the nine—or would it be twelve?—dollars that would be his due.

But even that would be difficult—getting the money together. Obligated as they had been to ride home every night for the three weeks, with a few stormy mornings additional, she and Rose had saved only two dollars. And of Tommy's gift of five dollars but three remained. Moreover, Tommy's father, since his punishment at school, had ceased to allow him the money he saved on railroad fares, so he was unable to contribute further. After much hesitation and anxiety, Betty finally decided, on that Wednesday, to appeal to her father. She would beg him for a loan which she would return on her birthday in July.

She was spared the necessity of so doing. Pogany, who was a very busy man and spent most of his evenings at the shop, was the last to notice how badly his daughter was looking. But when, shortly before the day when Betty determined to speak to him, he was suddenly struck by the change in her, he was startled and deeply concerned.

He knew that Betty was being kept after school every night as a punishment, but had no idea what her fault had been. His sister had come to him when Betty had refused to explain to her and asked him to compel her to do so, reminding him that when they were children and had been punished at school, they had been punished

again at home. But he had bidden Sarah leave the girl alone. He hadn't felt like being stern with the child. Betty was a good girl. Over and over during this first year of her going to school at Paulding, he had himself been impressed by her sweetness and goodness; and his old friend Bob Harrow had come to him more than once with tears in his eyes to dwell upon her wonderful kindness to his little, afflicted Rosy. Her Aunt Sarah, he had realized, had always been hard on Betty, and he feared he had rather backed her up in it. But he hadn't done it of late, and certainly he wouldn't now. He hardly knew what he ought to do. Had the girl's mother lived, she would have known—though quite likely had Bess been alive it would never have happened.

It hurt him to see how the girl grieved over her punishment, and on the night when she was hanging about to get a chance to ask him for the money, he spoke to her. They had finished tea, and Miss Pogany went into the pantry to mix bread.

"Betty, my child," he said with awkward kindness, "I am afraid you are taking your medicine pretty hard. Now see here, don't you mind it any more. Whatever you did is over and done with and can't be helped. I shouldn't wonder at all if Mr. Meadowcroft had been a mite too particular and severe. He's a fine man and we're all proud to have him in our midst and hope he will remain; but I don't suppose he knows much about boys and girls. And then, people that have always been rich and used to being waited on can hardly help being rather high and mighty and overbearing. But the term is almost over now, and Mr. Appleton will be back and everything will be merry again. And I want my little

girl to be merry. I want you to cheer up right away. I'm going to give you five dollars to get you something gay and pretty. You can go over to Paulding to spend it any day you like in your holidays and meanwhile you can be planning what you'll buy."

Betty tried to speak. Then she went to her father, dropped her head on his shoulder, and wept silently.

"There, there, cry if you like, child," he murmured, drawing her to his knee and stroking her hair gently with his big bony hand. "Cry it out and then put your mind on the pretty thing you can buy with your money."

"By the way, George," Miss Pogany began before she reached the dining room. And Betty, slipping down, fled precipitately. But her father followed her to the stair, tucked a five-dollar note into her hand, squeezed it, and returned to his sister.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE last day of the term had come and the last day of Mr. Meadowcroft's incumbency; for the principal of the school had fully recovered and would return to his duty after the Easter holidays. Despite their affection for Mr. Appleton, the greater number of the pupils were very loath to part with the man who had filled his place temporarily. For, even apart from his impressive elegance and the finer flavor of his scholarship, they recognized in Humphrey Meadowcroft a rare personality. The fact that he demanded rather more of them had acted rather as a stimulant; and they had found him quite as kind as Mr. Appleton and perhaps more understandingly sympathetic.

As for Mr. Meadowcroft himself—for him the day was very different from what it might have been. He was relieved when the day was over, though not with an healthful, wholesome relief. After the last straggler had finally departed, as he gathered his personal belongings together and set the desk in order, depression seized and settled upon him. On a sudden this whole experience, which started as a succession of red-letter days, seemed to have been signal failure.

He sat for some time with his brow in his hand. Then, realizing that he must be getting to the station, he raised his head and glanced around the big room in farewell review, seeing phantom forms with pleasant, eager faces filling the long rows of empty seats. His

heart warmed. He had certainly been happy for those first three weeks—as happy as he had ever been in his life. That wasn't a slight thing. He recalled a passage in Gibbon he had recently come upon in reading for one of his history classes which spoke of a mighty potentate who, at the end of a rarely successful reign over a prosperous kingdom, counted up the really happy days he had known in the fifty years. They had amounted to fourteen! And he had had twenty-one!

School had closed early, and though the boys and girls had lingered long over the parting, there was none in sight now as Meadowcroft passed through the street, and none of the South Paulding children at the station. Of course they would all have taken the earlier train, he said to himself, as he realized that he had been hoping for Tommy's company home. And in any event, Tommy had probably walked, as he always did except when he stayed for the extra lesson after school.

As he made his way through the aisle of the train, however, he saw Betty Pogany ahead, sitting alone, and joined her. Betty had had an errand in Paulding to do for her father which kept her, and as the village dress-maker was waiting for Rose, she had gone home with some of the other girls.

Betty's coldness was always gentle. But her gravity did not lift, and after the word of greeting, she turned and gazed steadily out the window. There was something demure, something at once pretty and pathetic, in the dignity of her manner. Vain, silly, headstrong, as he was forced to believe her, he saw only sweetness, nevertheless, in her deep brown eyes and goodness that was almost nobility in her face. After all, the folly

hadn't gone deeply; it hadn't really hurt her. In some manner, the girl must have felt herself privileged; she had somehow believed that she had a charter to do wrong rightly. Certainly she looked to-day rather a martyr than a sinner.

"The last day is over," he said quietly as the train started. "And now that the relationship of pupil and teacher is over between us, Betty, I wonder if we can't slip back into the simpler one that preceded it? Can't we forget what has happened and be friends again?"

The girl had nothing to say. He didn't know whether it was that she couldn't or wouldn't speak.

"Of course it has been hard, awfully hard," he admitted, "but perhaps you haven't realized that it has been hard for me, too. I felt forced to act as I did. And yet, although I tried to do only what seemed to be my plain duty in the circumstances, I daresay I bungled things sadly. And perhaps if I hadn't felt personally rather hurt, I might have had more patience. If I was harsh and over-severe, Betty, I am truly sorry and ask you to pardon and forget."

The girl's white cheeks flushed. Turning, she raised her dark, gentle eyes steadily to his. She was Bouncing Bet no longer. She was thin and worn and truly martyr-like with that seemingly fixed expression of sadness upon her innocent, childish face.

"I can never forgive you, Mr. Meadowcroft," she returned in a voice which though very low wasn't quite steady. "And forget—I can never, never to the end of my life forget—what you have done. I ought——"

She choked, clasped her hands tightly, and drew a long, sobbing breath. Then she went on.

"O, I don't know what I ought to have done!" she cried despairingly. "I don't know what I could have done, only—I ought to have done something! But I didn't know—I'm only a little girl, really, though I look so big—and anyhow—I couldn't have stood out against everybody. And—everybody would have been against me."

Her eyes filled with tears, but she pressed her pocket handkerchief to them and would not give way.

"Betty!" he protested, greatly distressed, "you know I——"

"You might have trusted me!" she cried reproachfully. "You might have known I wouldn't break rules just for the sake of being bad, and that for all the world I wouldn't have been hateful to you on purpose. You might—you might have trusted me, Mr. Meadowcroft."

"Yes, Betty, I might have," he owned, deeply moved, but more perplexed than ever. "I almost wish I had. And yet—how could I? You wouldn't explain—you wouldn't vouchsafe one word, and when I appealed to you, you seemed—well, just plain stubborn and headstrong. And you must consider my position. I was in another's place, trying to hold things together for him as best I could. And I had to regard the others. Everyone knew that you and Tommy and I were like old friends, and it was my duty, not to favor you as inclination might have urged, but to be strictly impartial, just as it was yours not to——"

He broke off, for he couldn't find words which would express the idea without sounding unkindly. Betty turned to the window again. Her distress was evident,

and good as were his intentions, he felt constrained to cease from troubling her. Only as they drew into South Paulding he spoke.

"I am going away to-morrow, going to Philadelphia for a little, so I will say good-bye now, Betty. I hope your holidays may be very happy."

Happy! as if she would ever know a happy day again with Rose blind forever when she might have recovered her sight—and he who spoke thus mockingly, to blame! She put a limp hand into his without a word. Tommy was waiting for her, and they went off together.

Later, Tommy appeared in Meadowcroft's sitting-room.

"I hear you're going off again," he grumbled.

"I am glad there's someone who will regret my absence," Meadowcroft observed.

"I don't know what I'll do without you. Two whole weeks without magic is no cinch, believe me! I think I'd rather go to school even with the extra class after school thrown in," he declared.

He grinned and Meadowcroft smiled.

"I wish myself I could be here to help you while away some of the time, Tommy," he assured the boy warmly, "But I must return to Philadelphia to finish something I had just started in January when I was summoned back to take the school. If it were not really important, I would wait a fortnight and play with you. I have been thinking that perhaps we might rig up a sort of laboratory in the billiard-room and do a bit of experimentation in chemistry and physics in lieu of magic?"

"Gee! that would be bully!" Tommy cried with shining eyes.

"And more useful and perhaps just as much fun?" Meadowcroft suggested.

Whereupon Tommy Finnemore approved himself a true artist.

"'Twould be heaps of fun and I'd like to do it first-rate, but if it was a free choice, you know, magic for mine always," he confessed. "I shouldn't wonder if part of the reason I like it so much is that it ain't any real good—all goes up in smoke. Dad thinks I'm lazy and shiftless and good-for-nothing, and like as not I am. He says I don't take after him, and if he only knew it, I'm mighty thankful I don't. But I'll get along till you come back—one thing and another. There are other things. Like as not, I'll get off in the woods by myself and play on a comb—that ain't so bad."

"You'd better devote yourself to Betty as much as you can," Meadowcroft counseled. "Something's wrong with her—terribly wrong, it would appear—and I rather think you know what it is. Fortunately, she hasn't turned against you, and you may be able to do something to cheer her up."

"If I could only do magic!" cried the boy. "A trick I was just going to work on would fairly take your breath away if I could get it to come out. And that's what Betty needs—to have her breath taken away so that she—*forgets*, you know."

Bouncing from his chair, he went to the fire and poked it vigorously sending the smoke out into the room.

"You know, honestly, Mr. Meadowcroft, Betty is—all right," he said in a low voice, turning, but keeping his eyes upon the hearth rug. "Things do seem queer—she seems so herself—and—I don't blame you. You

were up against it and just couldn't do anything else. But there's something about Betty if you have always known her and are pretty near her age and sort of growing older together, you know, so that—why, you just can't help believing in her more'n you would in any fellow. And whatever she does, you can't help feeling somehow it's—just right."

Such faith of youth in youth—*Credo quia impossibile*—touched Humphrey Meadowcroft deeply. He envied the boy, and yet, as he had said to Betty, how could he himself have acted otherwise? One who has had nearly half a century of experience must make use of knowledge painfully won and tested. And a man isn't the free agent a boy may be.

CHAPTER XXXV

ON Wednesday afternoon, Betty and Rose set out directly after dinner, ostensibly for Paulding, in reality for Millville, with nine dollars in the little pocket of Betty's blouse for Dr. Vandegrift. Aunt Sarah had grumbled at her going in holiday time, but Betty's father had declared she should do as she liked not only to-day but for all the vacation and see if she couldn't pick up a little before she went back to school.

"It seems funny to talk of your having to pick up, Betty. You have certainly changed a lot in a year," he declared kindly.

As she flushed, the girl was prettier than ever, and Pogany put his arm about her—she was nearly as tall as he—and drew her awkwardly to himself.

"I like that style of gown on you, Betty," he observed. "You'll be wanting spring and summer things soon, and I hope you'll have 'em all like that or as near like as you can get."

He turned to his sister. "You'll remember that, won't you, Sarah?" he asked. "You see to it that the stuff is good, Betty'll look after the style, and I'll foot the bills."

Betty kissed him gratefully and tried to show a gratification she could not feel. She couldn't think of anything but of getting over to Millville and seeing Dr. Vandegrift. She had said to herself that they had only

to go over for this last time and to pay him for the three visits they had lost. It might be painful explaining, of course, and Dr. Vandegrift might demand three dollars more, but—that was all. And yet, that wasn't all. Hope dies hard, and there was probably still a spark left in Betty's breast. Dr. Vandegrift had told them that to lose one visit was extremely hazardous and to lose more than that absolutely fatal. Still, Rose had had and had responded surprisingly to nine treatments with the eye-cup. Wasn't there a slight chance that all was not lost?

She was very quiet all the way. Rose, however, was full of spirits and laughed and chatted as blithely as ever. And Betty felt that her hope must be far the stronger, and was alternately cheered and appalled by the realization.

It had rained last night at Paulling, but snow had fallen in Millville, the last light fall of the season. Parrot Street wasn't, therefore, so unsavory as usual; but the building in which the doctor had his office seemed to have grown far more ramshackle in the interval. Betty supposed it was only that she had rather forgotten how dismal it was; and of course the clean white snow made it the more conspicuous. But within, she was sure that it was far worse. The stairs fairly made her shudder. Wherefore, her heart sank the more sickeningly when she tried the door and found it fast.

"The catch must be down," she said to Rose as she knocked lightly. "Of course he wouldn't be expecting us after three weeks—four to-day. And he's probably busy with someone else."

She knocked again. Still there was no response. The

silence was so oppressive that when she knocked more sharply she was startled by the reverberation.

"Nobody home!" observed Rose coolly.

"He's probably just stepped out to get something," Betty explained. "Of course with that battery and the eye-cup and all those valuable things, he'd just have to lock the door. We'll wait, Rose dear."

Presently Rose suggested that Dr. Vandegrift might be within and had fallen asleep. Whereupon Betty began pounding upon the door. Still nothing happened. She kept it up for some time until Rose put a warning hand on her shoulder.

"Listen, Betty, what's that?" she asked. Betty listened. A voice came up from below.

"Saaye, Mees! Saaye, Mees!" it called, and taking Rose's arm, Betty led her down. At the foot of the stair, she saw a slatternly-looking foreign woman who smiled and moved her hands in sweeping gestures.

"Go-o," she said, rolling her eyes grotesquely. "Go-o, go-o. Saaye, mees, cop! cop!"

"What does she mean, Rose?" Betty whispered.

"I think she wants us to go and is saying that if you make such a racket the cop'll be after us," Rose returned, and addressed the woman. "You want us to *GO*?" making the last word very emphatic.

"Ya, go-o, go-o," the woman said, raising her hands palms outwards, and adding "cop!"

Once outside, Rose's hand tightened on Betty's arm. "I know why he isn't here. You know to-morrow's fast day. Well, he comes from another state, and it's probably fast day there to-day."

Betty accepted the suggestion with great relief.

"And yet, I should think he might have come just the same," she added.

"He believes we've given up, of course, after all this time."

"Yes, but all his other patients. Don't you suppose there's any of them that ought not to miss a week in their treatment?"

Rose shrugged her shoulders. "Well, we might as well give up now, don't you think?" she asked coolly.

"We've got to pay him, so we'll have to come next Wednesday," Betty declared. "And—O, Rose, it may not be so bad after all. Perhaps having the nine treatments, it won't be—too late. You could have one next week and then perhaps for next term Dr. Vandegrift would give us a later hour."

"How about the money?" Rose asked.

"O, we'll get the money all right," Betty assured her.

Rose sighed. "Well, it would be an awful bother, and there'd be a row about our getting home late. And anyhow, Betty, I don't care much," she confessed. "I don't really mind being blind at all. I have such good times right along and you and I are always together. Everybody is lots nicer to me than if I could see and it's exciting doing everything—the most common, ordinary things. I can write my papers and examinations with that nice frame your father made me, and I don't mind not taking algebra. And really, I seem to do a lot better with my music."

Betty stopped and kissed her warmly. She didn't at all accept Rose's words at their face value; she simply was more than ever impressed with her bravery and self-denial. And she was more than ever determined upon

making a desperate attempt on the following Wednesday to persuade Dr. Vandegrift to give them another chance.

That Wednesday being the regular day of the Sewing Society, she had no difficulty in getting away, and Mrs. Harrow was always lenient. The girls repeated the process of the week before only too literally, for when they had climbed the dirty stair, they found the door locked as before. Again, there was no response to Betty's knocks and frantic appeals. She kept up, however, long after she knew it was vain, only yielding when the warning calls of the foreign woman from below made her fear lest she have them arrested, smiling as she was.

It was clear that Dr. Vandegrift had gone finally—that he came no longer for his weekly day for appointments at Paulding. Betty supposed that what he had feared had happened—that the jealous doctors had tracked him to his hiding-place and driven him away. It came to her with a terrible pang that discovery of him might have come through her—or rather through Mr. Meadowcroft. Betty was quite aware that there had been a great deal of comment at South Paulding concerning Rose and herself since Mr. Meadowcroft had made them conspicuous. Suppose from it that awful Dr. Mellen had guessed about their going to Millville and had done as Dr. Vandegrift had more than once said he had threatened to do—made it hot for the distinguished specialist! It seemed very likely. And if it were so, Mr. Meadowcroft was responsible not only for spoiling Rose's life but for who knows what injury to Dr. Vandegrift's other patients?

Even such painful thoughts which occupied Betty as they passed through the town were not so cruel as the

utter blackness of despair that presently settled upon her as she realized that now hope had utterly vanished. Rose, who knew from her voice something of Betty's distress, repeated her assurances of the preceding week, but to-day they only made the situation worse. Betty felt that she couldn't bear to have Rose endeavor to keep up the struggle longer. It would be far better for her to give way. If she continued to lock such bitter anguish up in her heart, might it not prove fatal?

And then it came to the girl that perhaps that was to be the end of it all. Perhaps by the time June had come, instead of recovering her sight in the manner in which they had anticipated, Rose should have died from a broken heart! It came coldly to Betty Pogany that perhaps this was to be the answer to her prayers—the only possible answer since Mr. Meadowcroft's interference. Perhaps Rose was indeed to recover her sight in June, but not on earth—only in paradise!

CHAPTER XXXVII

“**W**HERE are we at, Betty?” Rose queried suddenly after long silence.

“We shall be at your side gate in two minutes,” returned Betty. And Rose detected almost a sob in her voice. Reaching the gate she stopped, drew Betty down, flung her arms about her, and embraced her warmly.

“Betty, dearest and best, don’t take it to heart so, please, please. Honest and true, cross my heart and hope to die I don’t care,” she cried. “And anyhow, Dr. Vandegrift may be sick or he may have had to move his office somewhere else. He wouldn’t have any way to send us word, you know.”

Encouraged by this suggestion, again Betty summoned forth her courage. Next day she went alone to Millville. She didn’t venture to ask permission. Aunt Sarah, she knew, would refuse and she wasn’t sufficiently sure of her father’s approval of her going to Paulding two days in succession to risk it. Moreover, he had advised her at noon to lie down and have a nap after dinner. She started to wash the china, thinking she would steal away afterwards, but had hardly begun when there was a knock at the door. It was old Mrs. Crowe, who never cared how early she came and whose calls were sure to be visits. The moment she and Aunt Sarah were safely in the sitting-room, Betty packed all the china in the dish-pan, piling the pots and pans on top. Concealing it beneath the sink that it shouldn’t call unneces-

sary attention to her absence, she got her hat and jacket and rushed away over the Paulding turnpike.

At Millville she went first to the building on Parrot Street and went fearfully through the uppermost story and the ground floor, but found no tenants. The whole building was empty and indescribably dreary in its darkness and dirt and in the chill closeness of the atmosphere. In an adjoining tenement house, she found only foreigners unable to speak or to understand English.

Thence she went up into the main street and made her way to an apothecary shop. She wouldn't venture to make inquiries of a doctor, but very likely the apothecary would know. She had heard Dr. Vandegrift speak so often of the heavy bills he had to pay for drugs that she concluded he must be on friendly terms with the apothecary and that the latter was to be trusted.

The apothecary shop was also a center for the sale of liquor and a general lounging-place. Betty entered timidly and glanced rather shrinkingly about the crowded room. The clerk looked like a veritable bar-tender and she hesitated to approach him. She was battling against an impulse to flee when a man came forward to her from behind a partition in the back of the shop.

He was a pharmacist and only handled the prescriptions. But he noticed the entrance of the sweet, refined-looking girl who, tall as she was, had the face and bearing of a frightened child, and took pity on her shyness and confusion.

"Can I do anything for you, miss?" he inquired deferentially.

Betty raised her brown eyes to him gratefully.

"There was a gentleman who—treats the eyes that I

was trying to find," she explained politely. "I thought you might know about him—whether he's ill or—he isn't at his office."

As the man stared at her, he muttered something under his breath.

"Not that Vandegrift—you don't mean *him*?" he said so angrily that Betty feared that he, too, was in the conspiracy against poor Dr. Vandegrift.

"Yes, sir, Dr. Vandegrift," she returned with dignity.

But his eyes looked very kind and his face was as sorry as his voice as he said: "You don't mean, little girl, that you were one of the many persons that were taken in by that—er—scoundrel?"

The girl looked up anxiously.

"You—you know him, sir?" she asked falteringly, not sure that she wasn't acting the part of a traitor.

"I don't know him to my sorrow as about half the factory people here do," he returned. "That scamp cleaned a pile o' money out of this town before he was arrested, believe me."

"Arrested!" cried Betty, appalled.

"Yes, arrested, though he slipped right out from under the sheriff's nose and made his getaway,—a slippery chap, he! And it seems he's wanted in half a dozen other places where he was doing the same thing as he was here. The very day after he was arrested here, they came from up-State after him."

Betty fixed the stranger with a puzzled look in her gentle brown eyes.

"Do you mean that he wasn't a good man, sir?" she asked.

"He was a—a—miserable scoundrel!" the chemist

declared, trying to suit his language to this tall, innocent child.

Betty was calling to mind Dr. Vandegrift's assertions concerning the jealousy of the medical profession and the consequent perils of his situation.

"I am sorry he should seem so," she remarked, "but he—he knew his business? He made—marvelous cures?"

"Marvelous humbug!" the chemist exclaimed, the more forcibly because he felt so strongly the simple charm of the girl. "Why, my dear child, that man was a horse jockey. He had education enough to talk big, but not the slightest knowledge of medicine. He worked at an eye hospital once, scrubbing floors and doing heavy work and that's the way he picked up enough medical words to write his advertisements and fool his patients. His electric battery was a wooden chest filled with wet sawdust and his galvano eye-cup—so much wood! But he raked in the cash—take it from me."

The girl was so manifestly shocked and stunned that he fetched a chair quickly. But she did not move—only thanked him in a dazed manner and stared straight before her. He spoke to a youth among the loafers.

"Look here, Dan. Step round to the *Record* office and get a copy of the paper that showed up the eye-doctor, two—three weeks back. Get two if they have 'em."

When the boy returned, Betty was able to thank the chemist politely and to offer to pay for the papers. He waved his hands.

"You're welcome to 'em, miss," he assured her. "The

extry copy is in case you know anyone else that got stung. I reckon you're from Paulding?"

"South Paulding."

"It's amusing reading, that account is, for those that aren't mourners," he observed. "I hope you didn't lose much by the scamp, miss?"

The girl smiled wanly. "I don't know. I can't tell till I have had a chance to think it over and—get used to it," she said almost gaspingly. "It is—pretty sudden. Thank you, sir, and—good day."

She dragged herself to Paulding, still in a daze. From Paulding she took the train home. There was no longer special reason for saving her fares, and in any event, the walk from Millville seemed to have taken every atom of her strength.

At the station at South Paulding, Tommy awaited her.

"Your Aunt Sarah came ripping and tearing over to our house after she'd been to Rose's thinking you were lost or kidnapped or run away," he said to account for his presence. "I told her Mr. Meadowcroft had sent you an errand to do through me and that——"

The boy faltered. He couldn't go on. Betty's expression arrested him. Was it horror or terror or—what?

Up to that moment, Betty had thought only of Rose—how cruelly her hopes had been raised and kept up when really there had never been any hope: it was all worse than a lie. Now it came upon her that much besides was involved. Learning of her terrible mistake had on a sudden changed the aspect of everything; it had removed the moral support from her past actions so that suddenly now everything gave way, collapsed, and fell about her ears. And here was poor, innocent Tommy

involved in the ruins! He had told falsehoods; he had lied once and again; he was so used to it now that he had rattled this one of to-day off glibly. And now there was no justification—no June to make everything right!

CHAPTER XXXVIII

“**W**HAT is it, Betty? What’s up? He isn’t—dead?” the boy asked hoarsely.

Betty stared at him. “Come into the station—no, stand under this light, Tommy,” she bade him, “and read this.” And she thrust a paper into his hand with glaring headlines and an awful portrait of the bearded man of many aliases on the first page.

The boy’s eyes widened—seemed almost to start from his head as he gazed at the picture and the headlines. He swallowed the latter whole, then read the text wonderingly with great and growing excitement, with many interjections and, it must be owned, not without enjoyment of the dramatic completeness of the affair. But the moment he looked from the page to Betty’s tragic face, he was all sympathy.

Betty was not forced to explain. He understood it all in a twinkling.

“How much did the old skinflint get out of you?” he asked anxiously, as they walked up towards the avenue.

“O, Tommy! I don’t know, I’m sure!” cried Betty. “That’s no matter now. Think of Rose! This will simply kill her.”

“Ho! it won’t do anything of the sort!” he rejoined. “Believe me, she won’t take it anything like so hard as you do. I wouldn’t breathe this to anyone but you, Betty, but it’s my private opinion that Rose enjoys being blind.

It gives her a sort of a cinch, you know, and then in a way it's sort of fun. Do you remember once when I was a kid I limped around almost a whole term with a bad ankle? It really wasn't lame a bit after one night, but I never enjoyed myself more in all my life. I'd be doing it now—limping—like as not, only one morning—it was after it had got to be so natural that I should 'a thought I'd 'a limped if I walked in my sleep—I forgot all about it and came downstairs in two jumps and landed plumb on that foot. And there was dad right on the spot and laughing fit to kill. By the way, did Vandegrift, alias Warrenner, alias What-you-call-ums really look as slick as all that?"

"Yes—no—I don't know, I'm sure!" cried the girl. "But he was so kind and seemed so learned, so scientific. O, Tommy, don't you believe that even now there may be some mistake? He said the medical profession were jealous and persecuted him."

"No, Betty, he's a fakir all right. That's plain to see," quoth Tommy firmly. "When it comes to actually arresting him, you know, and all that horse jockey business, it means business."

The girl wrung her hands. Tommy winced secretly.

"Betty, I'll go home with you and then I'll come back and tell Rose about it," he proposed. "I'll promise to break it to her very, very gently, and then you can see her later on if you want or wait till tomorrow."

"O, Tommy! if you would!" she cried. "It seems as if I couldn't now—and yet—I want her to know it. Let's hurry. I've got to get home and do the dinner dishes. I hid them—under the sink!"

On a sudden, she began to laugh wildly. Then she stopped and leaned against a tree and in a few seconds the startled Tommy realized that she was sobbing violently.

Tommy went to her and put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Betty, don't," he entreated, "don't, please. Listen—O gee, if you don't quit, I shall be blubbering in just one minute, and then——"

As he choked, poor, unselfish Betty made a tremendous effort and controlled the tears that might have afforded her some slight relief. They went on in silence the rest of the way; but at her door Tommy assured her that he would be in to tell her about Rose directly after tea, and Betty thanked him in a voice that at least proved she wasn't crying.

When he appeared after tea, Betty lay on the sofa in the sitting-room. She hadn't been able to eat anything and looked so ill that even Aunt Sarah had been touched. She didn't scold the girl nor even question her. She forbore the satisfaction of telling her brother how Betty had hidden the dish-pan under the sink and stolen away. And now she was washing up the tea things herself in the kitchen.

Betty sprang from the couch at sight of Tommy and stood gazing at him imploringly as if begging him to say that Rose wasn't dead.

He pushed her back upon the sofa and sat down beside her.

"Rose is all hunky, Betty," he informed her coolly. "Honest, she took it as easy as if it was all about somebody else. She was mighty interested in the story—

made me read every word of it. It is a thriller, you know, the cheek of him and all that. And slick—— We were trying to make out where it was he gave the sheriff the slip. You know that siding a few rods north of the water tower?"

"O, Tommy, tell me, is Rose honestly—*resigned*? Are you sure—O dear, it will just kill her, I know."

"No such thing," he declared. "You think she was bluffing me? Not on your tin-type, Betty Pogany! And she sent word that you're not to take it any harder than she does and she'll see you to-morrow."

Tommy's words carried a measure of conviction. At least Betty felt that as yet Rose wasn't suffering as she would be later. Either she was stunned or she hadn't contemplated what it really meant. As Tommy turned and gazed with perennial interest upon his favorite picture, which represented Vesuvius in violent eruption, the girl forgot his presence. But the partial and temporary relief in regard to Rose only cleared the way for other complications. On a sudden a vision of Mr. Meadowcroft flashed across her mind. He wasn't—in a flash, Betty saw her conduct towards him stripped now entirely of its secret moral justification, in all its glaring, ugly nakedness.

She wrung her hands. It seemed as if she could not endure it.

"Betty!" cried Tommy, "what is it?"

"O, Tommy, there's Mr. Meadowcroft!" she cried in utter consternation. "Whatever shall I do? You see all the time I was really just as bad as he thought I was, because Dr. Vandegrift wasn't a good man and we were

truly running away. And I told him that *I* would never forgive *him!* ”

“Get your hat and come on over to his house. We’ll ask when he’s coming home, and that’ll give us something to figure on,” suggested Tommy.

CHAPTER XXXIX

AS Humphrey Meadowcroft changed cars at a junction twenty miles below Paulding, though he exchanged a Pullman express for a crowded and dingy coach of an accommodation train, he experienced, nevertheless, a strange sense of satisfaction which increased momentarily. He felt as if he were going home. He didn't remember to have experienced before just that peculiar sensation. It was almost as if he were a boy—the boy he had never been—going home for the holidays.

There were still lingering patches of snow in this section of the country on hillsides and in sheltered corners of meadows and fields; but it would not be long now before the elms of the avenue of South Paulding would be clad in their first delicate veiling of green. And already the children would be finding the first wild flowers in the woods. Next week when the schools would reopen, again he would see the little ones in starched blouses and pinafores, as he had first seen them a year ago, carrying tidy bouquets of anemones, hepaticas, blood-root, and mayflowers to their teachers. But last year he had been merely a spectator at the window. Now he felt himself a part of it all, one of the village people. Wherefore, it was truly home-coming.

He almost expected to find that odd, faithful Tommy Finnemore at the station. But he was returning two days earlier than he had expected, and there was no

way for the boy to learn of his change of plan. True, he had telegraphed his sister; but Isabel was the last person to take any trouble in a case of that sort. It wouldn't, indeed, be unlike her purposely to keep the knowledge from Tommy and Betty Pogany.

Whereupon Humphrey Meadowcroft shrugged his shoulders. It was hardly likely that Betty would make any attempt to inquire for him. He sighed. His journey had been in the interest of Rose Harrow and he had accomplished more than he had expected to be able to do. He wondered, half-whimsically yet seriously, too, whether even the stony-hearted Miss Pogany might not be moved by these results. He hadn't, of course, acted with any such purpose in mind—he had begun the quest at New Year's, and being interrupted had taken his first opportunity to return to Philadelphia and complete it. Nevertheless, there was no reason why it shouldn't serve as an entering wedge, and he felt that he might hope for an end of the absurd as well as uncomfortable relations between them that had held for the last weeks he had been in Mr. Appleton's place.

At the same time, the girl had declared she would never forgive him, and it might be that she would continue obdurate in the face of everything. Meadowcroft wasn't sure that she wasn't of the stubborn sort who cannot relent. After all, there was that curious Indian type of countenance which must stand for something. It wasn't so noticeable now that she was so thin—or was he more accustomed to it?—but it was the mold in which her features were cast. It might be that, once she had become convinced that another was her enemy, she was herself implacable thereafter.

Such a temperament should be handled with extreme care, he acknowledged. He said to himself that he supposed that until such an one is sufficiently mature to be reasonable, one should avoid direct issues. Doubtless he would have done better to speak to Betty quietly or to ask her and Rose to come to his home for an informal talk. He had felt at the moment that he ought to avoid that sort of thing—that it was incumbent upon him to treat his friends among the pupils exactly as he treated the strangers. But perhaps he had overacted. Perhaps he had been hard to speak out suddenly to Betty before the whole school. Perhaps he had been cruel in calling the girls out to the bench like criminals—Betty in particular, who, though she wasn't Bouncing Bet, was conspicuously tall and who had suffered so much as a child from being an object of curiosity. After all, he ought not to have expected her to be reasonable at thirteen and being of so limited experience. And if he had, indeed, seemed to her deliberately and perhaps revengefully cruel, certainly he ought to make large allowance for her. None the less, due allowance being made, the girl certainly had been high-handed. She had chosen and followed her own way so boldly and self-confidently that she had been a veritable Children's Crusade in herself!

Well, here was the scene of the crusade. Here was Paulding and yonder the high school. And shortly after the train stopped at South Paulding and there was his sister's carriage in waiting. There was no other greeting than that of the coachman and the station agent, but he was home again. And the morrow would bring Tommy.

CHAPTER XL

MRS. PHILLIPS had guests that evening. Her brother excused himself directly after dinner and retired to his own apartments. He had scarcely opened his book when Herbie came up to say that Miss Betty was at the door to ask when he was coming home.

Meadowcroft looked at the man incredulously. He didn't of course mean what he said. And Herbie hastened to explain.

"Of course I told her you was home, sir. She said she'd come again, but I was sure you would want to see her and she's waiting."

"Ask her to come right up, Herbie," Meadowcroft bade him. And he hobbled across the length of the great room and stood at the door to greet her, resting on one crutch. But though he reached out his hand eagerly, he didn't, somehow, expect anything other than the frigid politeness that had been her attitude during the last weeks of their intercourse. He was amazed almost beyond words at her sudden and complete change of front.

"O, Mr. Meadowcroft, I shouldn't think you'd want to shake hands with me!" she cried. "I shouldn't think you'd be willing even to see me."

"It's certainly a mighty pleasant sight to see you, Betty," he assured her warmly as he grasped her hand. "Come and sit down and let me tell you what I have been doing in Philadelphia."

Betty wouldn't even have allowed herself the luxury

of a chair, except for the fact that she wouldn't keep Mr. Meadowcroft standing. It wasn't possible to select an uncomfortable one; but she sat uncomfortably erect on the extreme edge of the straightest one near the wheeled-chair.

"I don't know how to begin," she said rather tragically, "only it has all been a frightful mistake and I was just as bad as you thought I was—perhaps worse—only——"

"Only you didn't mean to be—you didn't understand?" he suggested.

She looked at him helplessly.

"It is so different looking back," she faltered. "It seems so perfectly awful now. I only found out to-day." She clasped her hands rather wildly. She looked ill indeed; but he saw that there was nothing to do but to get through the explanation.

"You were making weekly visits to some sort of specialist—was that the case, Betty?" he asked kindly.

"Yes, sir, to Dr. Vandegrift, an eye-specialist. He promised to cure Rose and—he wouldn't let us breathe a word to anyone," she returned.

Meadowcroft sat erect. "I might have known!" he said to himself. To the girl he said: "Tell me all about it from the beginning, my poor child."

Whereupon she began with the day of his first departure for Philadelphia and related the whole story in detail. She spoke falteringly, with downcast eyes, and now and again she choked. But she went on bravely, omitting nothing, yet making no attempt whatever at self-justification. Even now, she wasn't wholly out from the spell of Dr. Vandegrift. And deeply touched as Meadowcroft

was, his lips twitched more than once at the utter absurdity of the tragic recital. At the end, she handed him the newspaper with its sensational revelations.

Meadowcroft glanced through it. Then he rose, gave it to her, and held out his hand.

"My poor child, this has been a terrible experience for you," he said very gently. "I can't bear to think how deeply you have suffered, and I can't tell you—I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am for you. And I wish——"

"Don't be sorry for *me*!" she protested. "And I am glad I suffered. I ought to have. And I feel as if I should just *die* when I think of how I acted to you. I thought—O, Mr. Meadowcroft, I just kept my mind on June, else I never could have borne it or gone on. And now—now there isn't any June!"

"O, my dear Betty, but there is a June! I trust there's many and many a June before you!" he cried. "After all, you have a good deal to sustain you at this very minute. You thought you were doing right, and certainly you acted unselfishly. You made a mistake. Your premises were false, but you were unaware of that, and all the while you were striving and suffering for what you believed a holy cause. You chose what you believed to be the greater good—the greatest good, indeed, the veritable *summum bonum*—and you sinned against formal law in your pursuit of it. You did wrong not unconsciously but wholly for another and with the zeal and courage of a martyr. You have learned your error, but don't reproach yourself further. Lack of judgment is all that a more severe judge than I could charge you with. For my part——" he smiled that rare,

charming smile peculiar to him—"I have nothing but admiration for you. The generous, suicidal audacity you showed has all the magnificence of a forlorn hope."

Tears filled her eyes. Her lips trembled pitifully as she tried to smile.

"I ought to have had more sense," she declared.

"I'm not so sure. You're not yet fourteen and you had never come in contact with duplicity before. And doubtless that scamp was plausible?"

She raised her eyes quickly.

"O, he was—I mean he seemed so scientific," she returned ingenuously. "It seemed to stretch your mind to take in his explanations. And really, he seemed just to long to cure Rose, partly because he loved his profession and partly because he wanted her to be happy."

"His insistence upon the fee didn't bother you?"

"Sometimes just a wee bit at first. Then I felt that he wanted to make sure of our never missing a week and believed we wouldn't be so likely to if we had sort of hard work scraping together the money, you know," she explained.

He smiled. "Now that, Betty, is sound psychology. If you could have only been as reasonable in other directions!" he exclaimed. "You know, your great mistake was in promising to keep it all secret. It almost seems as if you ought to have known better than that. And when I think of all you went through—of all you might have been saved——"

He paused, arrested by her pleading look.

"O, Mr. Meadowcroft, not me!" she cried vehemently. "It doesn't matter in the least about me. It's poor Rose. It's——"

"Betty, sit back in your chair, or we'll have to stop right here and postpone the rest of the discussion until to-morrow," he bade her. She complied so meekly that he almost felt as if he sat behind the school-master's desk.

"It is worst of all for Rose, of course," she said mournfully. "But it was harder on Tommy than you might think. And—of course it's different with you, Mr. Meadowcroft. I feel so mortified, so frightfully ashamed as well as sorry."

"Nonsense, Betty. Don't dwell on that longer. You have said you regretted your mistake and everything is all right between us. Honestly, so far as I am concerned, I don't care *that*," he assured her, and snapped his fingers.

She gazed at him sorrowfully.

"Didn't it—didn't it spoil all the pleasure you might have had in the school?" she asked, and a shadow clouded his brow.

"Well, Betty, I daresay it did—for the time," he had to admit. "But I think it will work itself out so that later the memory won't be unhappy. And now and for always I can truthfully say I don't mind at all. I don't care a copper. My sympathy remains with you."

"But Rose?" she cried.

"To tell you the truth, Betty, I do not believe Rose requires much sympathy," he said seriously. "I cannot think that she will take it greatly to heart. I have observed Rose very carefully—partly because of my desire to get some clew to the mystery—and I doubt extremely if she has really suffered at all. It is my belief that she didn't go into the thing deeply in the beginning and that it won't be painful for her to get out. Tell

me truly: have you any evidence whatever of this being a great blow to Rose?"

"She acts just about the same," Betty confessed, "but—Rose is very brave. I feel as if she were hiding it in her heart."

"You needn't feel so," he declared. "Rose is daring; but she hasn't that slow, enduring, patient sort of courage that would enable her to bluff in a matter of this sort. I don't say that Rose is shallow; but she isn't as yet deep. She's young and she is extremely immature. Certainly, she doesn't hide her feelings. If she says she doesn't mind and acts accordingly, you can rest assured that she doesn't. She is truly sadly afflicted, but really, Betty, I cannot see how such a deprivation could possibly be felt less than Rose has felt it since that day last spring when you rescued her from unalleviated wretchedness. Her mother has told me more than once that Rose was never so happy in all her former life as she has been continuously since that time. No doubt she might be still happier if, having known blindness, she could recover her sight. Nevertheless, I am quite convinced that Rose is and will remain sufficiently content and happy for all common and useful purposes."

Meadowcroft dropped back in his chair. He didn't understand the wave of exhaustion that swept over him until he saw Betty's face. Then he realized how he had striven to impress her. He had seldom made a greater effort than that of compelling the girl to see that Rose wouldn't take the tragedy as she herself took it. He could scarcely believe that he had been successful. But truly Betty seemed impressed and relieved. And his heart leaped.

She made a movement as if to rise.

"No, no, sit still," he bade her. "I have such a lot to tell you, and Baker will take you home in the carriage afterwards. You're tired, I know, but we shall get very cheerful, I feel sure, while we're discussing things. And you will be ready to go straight to Rose the first thing in the morning."

CHAPTER XLI

BETTY drew a deep sigh. She hadn't dreamed she would ever feel eager again. Indeed, she had vaguely expected to go through the remainder of her years burdened with the sense of Rose's terrible despair and with that awful conviction of sin that had come upon her with the reading of the newspaper disclosures. Now, she could scarcely wait to hear what he had to say. But as she looked up eagerly she saw that though Mr. Meadowcroft's eyes shone, his face looked worn and very white.

"But, Mr. Meadowcroft, you're tired," she said gently. "I'll go home and think of all the comforting things you have said and come back to-morrow."

"No, indeed, Miss Pogany, you'll do no such thing," he declared. "We'll both forget our weariness and sleep all the better. Try Tommy's stunt and find a comfortable chair—curl up there in the corner of the sofa, and the minute you look comfortable enough to make me feel at ease, I'll begin—not a second before."

It would have been difficult to get fairly into the corner of that deep, high-backed cushioned sofa without feeling comfortable, and when Betty dropped her head back in weary content and smiled her readiness, Meadowcroft related what he had to say.

"I went back to finish what I had begun to look up at New Year's. You see, I felt troubled all through the autumn to feel that Rose wasn't taking all the studies

of her class—that she was omitting algebra and next year would omit geometry and so on. I came to the conclusion that there must be some method by which the blind learn mathematics, so as soon as I got a chance I went to a special school for the blind to find out. As a matter of fact, it's not so difficult and I rather think I can start her towards algebra right away. I'll show you the apparatus when Herbie has unpacked my things. It's a shallow box that looks like diminutive pigeon holes and metal counters like the type you see in a printing office. You reckon, compute, and perform the various mathematical operations by manipulating these counters in the tiny squares. I hope to have Rose so expert in figuring with it that she will be ready to take up algebra in the fall."

He paused and gazed at Betty with a look on his face she didn't understand. As a matter of fact, it came to him as he spoke that now was the moment to lay the specter of those unpleasant three weeks at school. Since the experience couldn't readily be forgotten, he was determined that it shouldn't rankle.

"I wonder how you would feel in regard to my ability to carry this through, Betty?" he asked quizzically. "From your experience, do you think I might be fairly thorough and successful as a special teacher?"

It hurt, as he knew it must; but it helped also. Betty smiled tremulously.

"Very thorough, but—very good and lots more patient than you ought to be," she declared.

"Would you advise my getting Tommy's opinion?" he asked anxiously; and then Betty had to laugh. And thereafter it all seemed simple and natural and—dif-

ferent. For they hadn't laughed together before since the New Year.

"Well, that isn't all. There's more yet," he went on. "It seems that there are all sorts of books, including school books, printed so that they can be read through the tips of the fingers. I knew vaguely, of course, that there were books, but I didn't somehow guess that they would have text-books. Those I knew about were like ours, only the letters were raised; but now there's something else—a system called Braille, after its founder, a Frenchman, which is an alphabet made up of combinations of pin points. There are any number of text-books in this Braille type, reference books, standard histories and the like, and a very good selection of general literature. I have engaged one of the teachers at the school I visited to come here to spend the summer to teach Rose, and incidentally you and me, to read in that language. We'll have lessons here every morning in the billiard room or garden and in the afternoon the lady, Miss Bingham, will give Rose all sorts of other instruction—sewing and knitting and playing cards—and will help her with her music."

Betty's face was eloquent with the surprise and delight she couldn't express. Meadowcroft recollected his meditation concerning the Indian cast of her features and smiled within himself.

"It sounds like magic!" the girl cried. And that reminding her of Tommy, she declared she thought he'd like to learn, too."

"Tommy will be very welcome, and I meant to give him a chance," he said. "Only as he'll only just be getting back to his own particular magic again when Miss

Bingham arrives, it's likely that he won't be tempted. I knew you would want to learn, too; and if I didn't want to learn it myself for the sake of helping Rose through the high school, I should be very glad to be able to read in bed on wakeful nights without lighting up. Rose can teach her mother, too, if Mrs. Harrow feels like learning."

"It is so wonderful that I don't know what to say!" cried Betty. "And—there's June to look forward to after all!"

Meadowcroft smiled. "We'll have to have a jolly summer whether we wish it or not," he declared. "If I remain in South Paulding, my sister will make me promise to do all sorts of things for my health. And of course, taking Miss Bingham away from her holidays, we've got to make it up to her and give her as much enjoyment as we can. By the way—" he smiled—"she is expecting rather a marvel in you, Betty."

"In me! In Rose, you mean."

"Not at all. I told her about Rose and of her mother's methods and how you suddenly stepped in, picked up Rose, put her on her feet and kept her there. I had always thought myself, you know, that it was mighty decent of you, as Tommy would say; but you should have heard her rave about it. You really have a lot before you, Betty Pogany, to live up to her expectations."

He rang for the carriage.

But praise was the last thing Betty Pogany wanted. She had craved pardon and she would have accepted any amount of reproach or undertaken any penalty.

"But didn't you tell her how you started it, Mr.

Meadowcroft?" she protested. "I never should have dreamed of doing it if you hadn't put it into my head! It really wasn't me at all."

"I'll tell you what I did. I assigned the credit where it was due," he said cryptically.

As he bade her good-night, he was struck anew by the almost tragic alteration in the girl.

"Dear me, Betty, I wish there were something I could do for you—for your very own self. Isn't there something particularly jolly you could do these last two days of your holidays to make you forget the burdens you have been carrying and turn you back into a little girl again?"

"O, I don't need anything more! I'm longing to tell Rose and then we'll both be looking forward to the summer!" she cried. "And I feel sure Tommy'll come, too, and that will make it perfect."

Her eyes fell. As she raised them, the girl smiled wanly. Generous to a fault, he saw that she endeavored to fall in with his beginning.

"I'll tell Tommy it will be the Latin Composition class only with another teacher and you on the bench with us three," she said as lightly as she could.

"No benches for us!" he exclaimed. "Settees in the garden and sofas and stuffed chairs in the billiard room. I got globes and raised maps and impedimenta of all sorts and we'll have a fine study up there on the top floor."

CHAPTER XLII

THE first use to which the great handsome room with its beamed ceiling, great chimney, deep fire-place, and handsome solid furnishings was put was social, however, rather than educational. On Sunday, Meadowcroft showed Betty the draught of an invitation he was preparing to send out to the Appletons and to the members of the fourth-year class of the Paulding High School.

“Mr. Humphrey Meadowcroft requests the honor of your company at 20, West Main Street, South Paulding, on Saturday, April 17th, at half-past three o’clock. At four, Mr. Thomas Finnemore, assisted by Miss Pogany, will give an exhibition of magic and Miss Harrow will play selections on the pianoforte. Supper will be served at half-past six and carriages to take the guests home will be at the door at half-past eight. R. S. V. P.”

“Can you suggest any changes?” he asked gravely.

Overjoyed as she was with the thought of the happiness in store for Rose and Tommy, on a sudden a sense of her own unworthiness swept over Betty Pogany.

“I wish you would put me down as Bouncing Bet,” she said almost fiercely.

“I am sorry to disappoint you, but it wouldn’t be true. It would be an out-and-out whopper,” he asseverated.

She looked rather pleadingly into his eyes.

"I'll tell you why I'd like to have it so," she said seriously. "It would be like wearing mourning. If you do that, people know you have lost friends. I'd like always to go by the name of Bouncing Bet, so that everyone would understand——"

"You would like to be branded? An outward and visible sign?" he rejoined. "I know what you mean, Betty, and no doubt many of us would like now and again to don actual sack-cloth. But I can't allow you to speak nor to feel that way. The past is past and you have promised to try to forget it. And now, unless you agree to forgive yourself absolutely and unconditionally, I shall countermand this order and call off the party. That would be hard on Tommy, for he's quite mad over his part of the program, one trick in particular, which consists of making an omelet in a silk hat—my silk hat, mind you—being worth a day's journey in itself. And it would be hard on me, for I got a special dispensation from Tommy's father allowing him to practise magic for a fortnight. And it would be hard on Rose because she has her pieces at her fingers' ends and happens to have a new gown into the bargain."

Betty had a new gown, too, a gift from her father. It was a charming gown, as pretty as had ever been seen in South Paulding, and so becoming that George Pogany was not the only one who thought the girl rarely lovely on the night of the party. Mr. Meadowcroft had gone to Betty's and Tommy's fathers and to Rose's mother and explained the circumstances that had caused so much trouble. No other could have done it so sympathetically and in such a manner as to touch even Mr. Finnemore.



The famous trick of making an omelet in a gentleman's silk hat was heartily applauded

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Pogany warmed more than ever to Betty, and Tommy's father not only removed the ban temporarily upon his son's favorite diversion, but planned to make it permanent after the party, and to give the boy his railroad fares again the next term towards the purchase of supplies.

Some of the guests at the party declared that Tommy Finnemore should have had a new suit, for he was a perfect sight. Perhaps he was. Certainly his trousers and jacket sleeves had been much too short at Christmas, and he had grown nearly three inches since. But Tommy never thought of his clothes, though he looked with great admiration upon his assistant and was very careful of her gown. The boy was in his element, perfectly happy during the progress of the performance, and also for weeks afterwards in dwelling upon it—in speech when he could get a friendly ear, otherwise in dreams. Out of nine tricks, four worked perfectly, two of them being the second and third best of the nine; and the other five were so interesting to watch that the majority of the spectators didn't know and the rest didn't care that they did not come out exactly as they should have done.

The famous trick of making an omelet in a gentleman's silk hat was heartily applauded. A successful magician mixes the eggs with a flourish and presently brings out, not an omelet but a garland of flowers. The flash of red fire which was supposed to cook the ingredients was a great surprise, and Tommy drew forth a handsome wreath of flowers with an impressive gesture. Traces of the egg, which should have disappeared, being transformed into flowers, were, however, visible, and Mr. Meadowcroft's hat was considerably damaged.

He declared that he didn't care, as he disliked to wear it, and presented it to Tommy for future use. And Tommy's last waking thought that night was that when summer should come and restore to him the opportunity to practise magic, he would devote all his leisure and all the eggs he could collect to perfecting this most alluring example of the conjurer's art.



